When do young people choose to communicate online and why?

Benedikta Fones with Rafia Haque: Final research report

Introduction

We took part in a research project looking at how young people interact with and use technology. We chose to base our research on the question "When do young people choose to communicate online and why?" We thought this was an interesting topic because it is very relevant, as most young people communicate online in one way or another. We wanted to find out why they do this and when they feel this is appropriate. We also wanted to find out if young people in different age groups behaved differently online, and used different methods of online communication. We thought that the outcome would suggest that many young people prefer to communicate online than face to face. We also thought that older students would use online communication more than younger students.

Methodology

We decided to ask 10 year 7`s and 10 year 10`s to fill out our questionnaire for our research. Firstly we introduced them Futurelab, our project and what we were trying to find out. We told them about what we were trying to find out and why we were doing this. We chose 10 years 7`s and 10 year 10`s because we thought they are a good group to survey because they will come up with different opinions and answers due to their age differences. This would give us some important results that we could analyse and acknowledge. We had to accommodate an extra Year 10 student, as we had a class group who came down to take part and there were more people than we expected.

After we finished our questionnaires we decided to take 5 year 7`s and 5 year 10`s for our focus group because we thought we could receive extra detail about people`s opinions and so that we could compare the results.

Due to privacy we made sure that none of the participants wrote their name anywhere on the questionnaire but we made sure that everyone signed the permission form given before they started the questionnaire. We did this so they would read the information on the permission form and know our reasons behind this research. We kept reminding our participants to not write their name anywhere on the questionnaire so they would be anonymous.

Afterwards, we told them after our research is finished; the audio recordings, questionnaires and permission forms will be stored in a secure location at Futurelab. We made it clear that the questionnaires will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 but everything will be anonymous. Before we chose the participants for our focus groups we told them that their voices will be recorded and they should only volunteer if they don`t mind having their voices recorded. The results would be up on the Futurelab website but would be anonymous, we had to make sure everything worked out as we planned and that we were being ethical throughout our project.

We wanted to use questionnaires to help us answer our question because we thought that they could give us a representative view of the opinions of young people in our school. We hoped that the results would show us what young people used online communication to discuss and what kind

of situations they feel it is appropriate to communicate online in. We also hoped to find out WHY they communicate online

We used a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions to get our results. We analysed the qualitative data by using tally charts and then used the most relevant questions to create bar charts. We analysed the quantitative data by classing themes.

We also used focus groups to find out some more in depth answers to the ways in which young people take precautions online, and who they think can access their details. We also asked them what they think are the best ways to communicate about different topics.

A copy of our questionnaire can be found in the Appendix at the back.

Questionnaire

Q1) *"Which methods of online communication do you commonly use? (E.g. sending messages and chatting)."*

The results showed that most year 7`s use Email and social networking to communicate online most and that most year 10`s use social networking. The year 10`s also use a lot of online gaming, chat rooms & forums and email. Some also used blogs.

Question 2: Who do you communicate with online? (Tick all that apply)
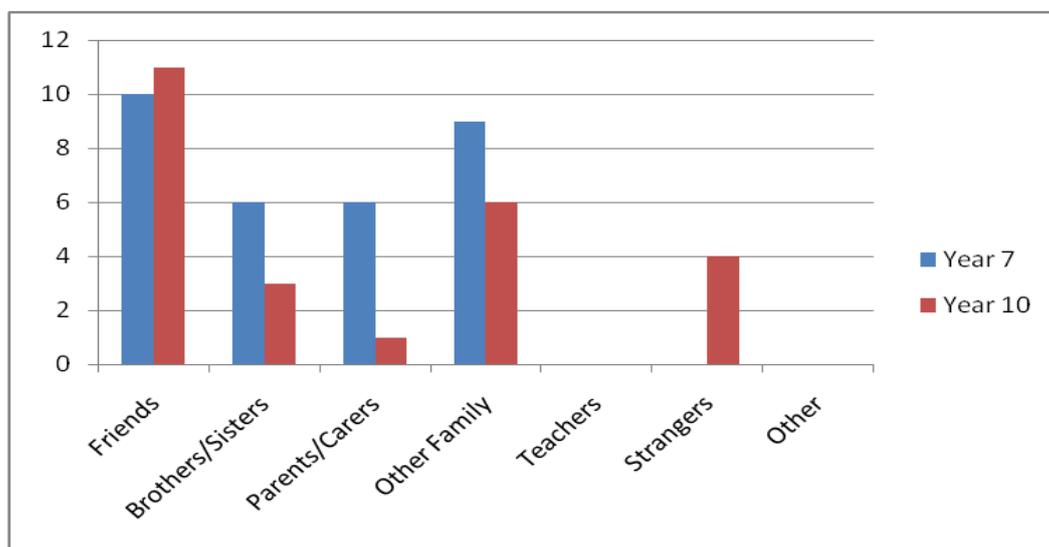
From the results, we can see that it is more common for both Year 7s and Year 10s to communicate with their friends online than with anyone else. More Year 7s preferred to speak to their families, and about half of the Year 10s said that they WOULD speak to strangers online. None of the students said that they communicated with teachers online. We were surprised that so many of the Year 10s would be willing to speak to strangers.

In this question, we found that the most common topics discussed online amongst Year 7s were Films, Games, Television, Friends and School and Homework. The most common topic of online discussion amongst Year 10s was Friends. The biggest differences between the two groups were in that nearly all of the Year 10s said that they discussed meeting up and socialising, and recent activities. 10 of them said this, but only 5 year 7s said they do these activities.

Q4) "*Can you think of an instance when you have preferred to communicate online rather than face to face?*"

We found that most year 7`s prefer to communicate face to face. They quoted, "It's better to see friends when you talk to them." Some year 7`s said that they do prefer online communication because they are scared to say it face to face, and too shy to ask someone out face to face. The majority of Year 10`s said they prefer face to face communication because it is better and the others that prefer online communication said it is easier to get feelings across as they don`t have to look at who they're talking to, and some people live far away so it's easier.

Question 5: Who do you prefer to communicate with face to face? (Tick all which apply)

Year 10

- Friends
- Brothers/sisters
- Parents/Carers
- Other Family
- Teachers
- Strangers
- Other
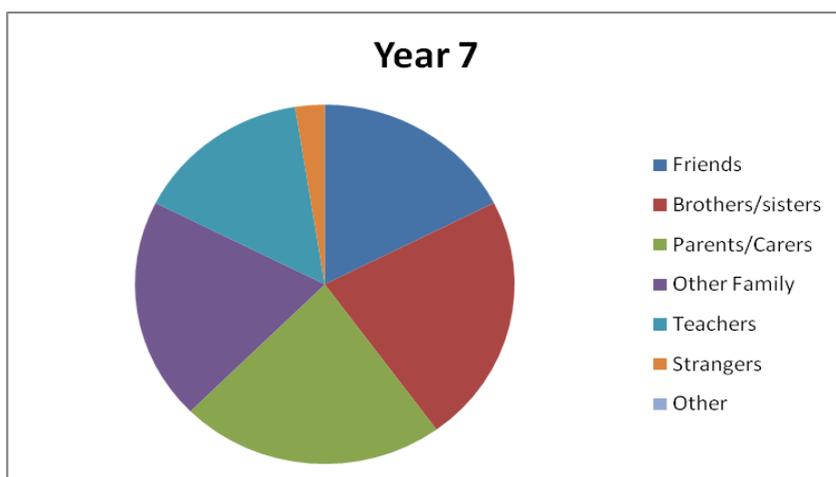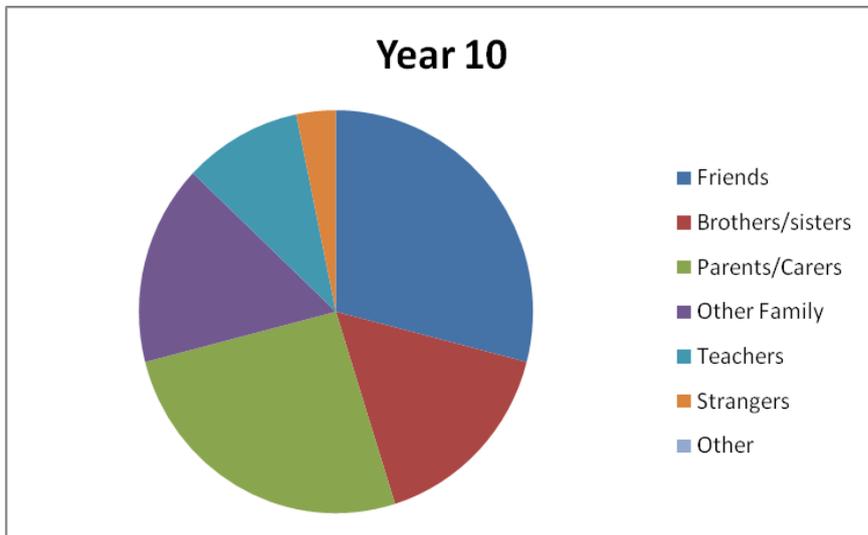
We found that the majority of Year 7s prefer to communicate with their brothers and sisters, or their parents/carers face to face. 1 Year 7 and 1 Year 10 said that they would communicate with strangers face to face. The most common choice of who to talk to face to face for the Year 10s were friends. This shows the different attitudes of Year 7s and Year 10s to who they communicate with face to face.

Question 6: What kinds of topics do you prefer to discuss when you communicate face to face? (Tick all which apply)
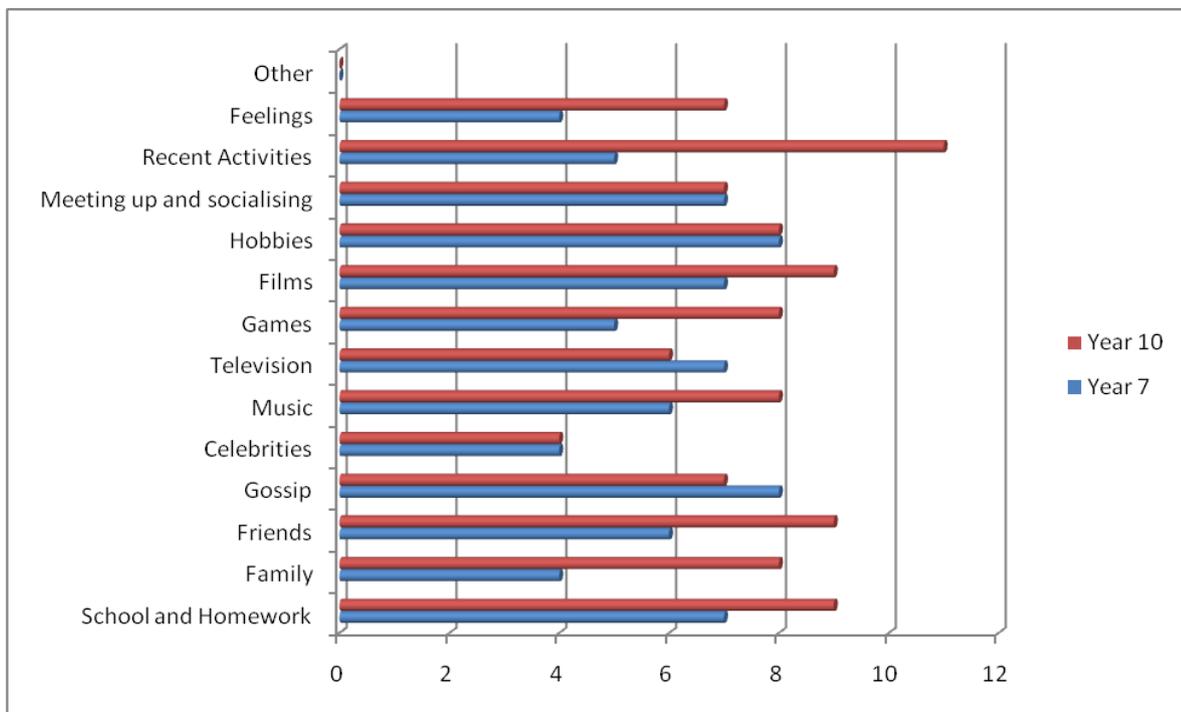
Here we found out that all of the Year 10s were more likely to talk about Recent Activities face to face than online(compared to Question 3 graph). However, they were less likely to talk about their friends face to face than online. The Year 7s were most likely to talk about Hobbies and Gossip face to face, and least likely to discuss Celebrities and Family face to face.

Q7) *"Can you think of an instance when you have preferred to communicate face to face rather than communicating online?"*

The same number of year 7`s said yes and no. The ones that said, "yes" said this because they think it is easier, and if it`s too long to put in an email they would rather speak to them.". One of the reasons for saying, "no" was that they think someone will have a go at them.

The majority of year 10`s don`t prefer to speak face to face and only one person said that they do prefer to speak face to face because it might be a serious matter or situation.

Q8) *"Do you think there are any topics which are easier to discuss online than face to face?"*

Our results made clear that most of year 7`s don't find any topics that are easier to discuss online rather than face to face because they are the same.

Half of the year 10`s prefer to speak about feelings online because it is easier. The other half said they don`t because they can`t spell very well and it is easier to speak.

Q9) Question 9 was," *Do you think that there are any topics which are easier to discuss face to face rather than online?"*

Results were that majority of year 7`s prefer to speak face to face about something serious, homework or gossip and friends. Majority of year 10`s said the opposite, that they don`t prefer face to face communication than online, but some of the year 10`s prefer face to face communication to discuss topics like friends, feelings, issues and serious matters.

Q10) *"Do you worry about anything when communicating online?"*We found out that 5 of our year 7`s worry about are that they are worried about whilst online is that it`s not who they think they are talking to. The year 10`s worry about who they are talking to and who can see it whilst communicating online but the majority of year 10`s don`t worry about anything whilst communicating online.

Focus Groups (Group Interviews)

Year 7`s said that they find it more effective to speak face to face rather than online because there are less misunderstandings, and it is easier to discuss longer topics. Year 10`s say they find it more effective to speak online rather than face to face because it is easier to get feelings across, you can use emoticons and you don`t have to be so embarrassed. However, Year 7`s said that they prefer face to face communication.

Year 10`s wouldn`t talk about information that is private or illegal online because it could be used against you. The Year 7`s wouldn`t talk about taking drugs and other situation like that face to face because they wouldn`t want others to see them and if they are sad or close to crying. Year 10`s wouldn`t talk about asking someone out or breaking up with someone face to face because it would be embarrassing.

Year 7`s prefer to use public rather than private online communication when they talk about their day or what they are doing. Year 10`s did not give an answer so maybe they don`t prefer to use public online communication than private online communication. Year 10`s prefer to use private online communication rather than public online communication when they talk about feelings, issues, organising a party which they don`t want others to know about, personal information and secrets.

The year 7`s think that friends will be looking at their profiles on social networking sites. Year 10`s think the opposite to year 7`s which is quite surprising because they say they think perverts, paedophiles and sometimes friends will be looking at their profiles!

Year 7`s say they would behave different online if their parents could see and if they couldn`t see their profiles or other online things they would behave the same. Year 10`s say that they do behave differently because they don`t want parents to see and they won`t give out personal detail or speak to someone who they don`t know. Year 7`s wouldn`t give personal details e.g. number, address, private things because secrets can be passed around and people could stalk you. Year 10`s wouldn`t give out personal info or swear in case parents or teachers see. They also wouldn`t put naked or indecent pictures online and some would just act normal online.

Year 7`s are mostly worried about not knowing the person they think they are talking to isn`t the actual person. They are also worried about paedophiles and telling a joke someone might not get. Year 10`s have a variety of worries such as; paedophiles, telling secrets, print screens, Facebook hacking. They quoted," sometimes you can tell who it is from the way they type and their online behaviour".

Conclusion

From all of our research overall we have found out that although both year groups use online communication quite a lot, Year 7s generally prefer face to face communication and Year 10s normally prefer to communicate online. The research also showed that both the year groups worry about the same sort of things whilst communicating online.

We found it surprising that year 10`s would rather ask someone out and break up with them online than face to face. The reason why we found this surprising was that we thought the year 10`s would be mature enough to do this face to face. The research we carried out really answered our question," When do young people choose to communicate online and why?" One of the answers from our questionnaire helped us answer this question well because we found out that year 7`s prefer to communicate face to face because it is better to see friends.

We also found out that the some of the year 10`s like to communicate online when they want to talk about feelings because you don`t have to look at the person and it's not so embarrassing, which may be the reason why year 10`s prefer to ask someone out online rather than face to face. We think that this has shown us some of the differences between how younger and older students use online communication. It seems that the younger students are more comfortable when speaking to family etc. However the older students all seem to prefer speaking to their friends.

One of the differences in attitudes was how some of the Year 10s would willingly converse with strangers online, whereas the younger students wouldn't do this. We believe that this could be

because of recent improvements in e-safety education, so the younger students would receive better information and warnings about the dangers of speaking to the wrong people online. An outcome which we DID expect was that neither the Year 7s nor the Year 10s would do or say anything private or very personal in public online communication. This included posting indecent pictures or posts anywhere online.

In conclusion to our question, we believe that most young people of varying ages use online communication in some way, but the ways they use it and the precautions they take depend on their environment, age, knowledge and education. We think that this research could be used to show schools and communities what young people's views on online communication are. If the wider communities understood more about how young people use online communication, they could encourage better education schemes to teach young people of all ages about the benefits and risks of communicating online.

Thank you for reading!

Benedikta Fones
With Rafia Haque

Appendix 1: Our questionnaire

When do young people choose to communicate online?

Which year are you in? (circle)

7   10

Which methods of online communication do you use most? (Tick all that apply)

Social Networking
Email
Online Gaming
Chatrooms and Forums
Other (please specify) ....
I don't communicate online

Who do you communicate with online? (Tick all which apply)

Family
Friends
Teachers
Strangers
Other (please specify) ....
I don't communicate online

What kinds of topics do you discuss when you communicate online? (Tick all which apply)

School and Homework
Family
Friends
Gossip
Celebrities
Music
Television
Games
Films
Hobbies
Other (please specify) ....
I don't communicate online

Can you think of an instance when you have communicated online rather than communicated face to face?

Yes, if so specify   No

....
....

....
....

....
....

....
....

....
....

Who do you communicate with face to face? (Tick all which apply)

Family
Friends
Teachers
Strangers
Other (please specify) ....
I don't communicate face to face
.
What kinds of topics do you discuss when you communicate face to face? (Tick all which apply)

School and Homework
Family
Friends
Gossip
Celebrities
Music
Television
Games
Films
Hobbies
Other (please specify) ....

I don't communicate face to face

Can you think of an instance when you have communicated face to face rather than communicated online?

Yes, if so please specify   No

....
....

....
....

....
....

....
....

....
....

Do you think that there are any topics which are more appropriate to discuss online than face to face?

Yes, if so please specify   No

....
....

....
....

....
....

Do you think that there are any topics which are more appropriate to discuss face to face than online?

Yes, if so please specify   No

....

....

....
....

....
....