DEMOS

INSIDE THE MIND OF A 16-YEAR-OLD

From Andrew Tate to Bonnie Blue to Nigel Farage - what do first time voters think about social media, politics, the state of Britain and their futures?

SHUAB GAMOTE
PETER HYMAN

NOVEMBER 2025

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FOREWORD
BY POLLY CURTIS

This essay is the result of a journey across the country made by two unique thinkers with contrasting experiences.

Peter Hyman, mid fifites, from London, white, with three children, and has worked as a political strategist for Tony Blair and Sir Keir Starmer, a history teacher, and headteacher.

Shuab Gamote, mid twenties, from Manchester, black, has a 16-year old brother, and is a Blavatnik School of Government Scholar, researcher and youth advocate.

Together, they travelled across the country and ran workshops with 16-18 year olds asking them questions about their lives on and off social media, the people who influence them, the politics this fuels and the futures they hope for. It is an exercise in deep listening, curiosity and humility. It matters because, if the government completes plans for votes for 16-year olds, this age group will be eligible to vote at the next election.

I was lucky enough to spend one day on the road with Peter and Shuab, visiting schools in Sheffield, where they facilitated conversations that have stayed with me since. The conviction with which the young people held their contrasting political views. The depth of their thinking and consideration of the political system. I was struck by how unusual the conversation was for the participants; the teachers watched nervously, the students talked past each other - eloquently and thoughtfully - but struggled to engage in real debate where differences arose. It made me hopeful for the next generation, but concerned about the urgent need for schools to help develop stronger civic habits such as the ability to debate hard issues, and ahead of this age group going to the polls.

At Demos we are concerned with upgrading our struggling democracy, to repair the broken relationship between state and citizen, and between citizens themselves. **This report offers new understanding on that, and should prompt a conversation about how to build democratic resilience for this age group as they prepare to vote** - I hope with the same humility and respect that the authors have shown here.

Demos is proud to be publishing this guest report; the authors are solely responsible for its contents. A huge thank you to Shuab and Peter for this work.

Polly Curtis, CEO Demos

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shuab Gamote is a researcher and writer whose work explores how young people understand politics, identity and belonging in a rapidly changing world.

He is a former Political Leadership Scholar at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford and previously worked in higher education, where he published in international journals and won awards for his research on student belonging. During this time, he spoke at conferences and events around the world on education, inclusion and youth participation.

Shuab has also written opinion pieces for national newspapers, examining the intersection of generational change, social identity and political culture in modern Britain. He is also a board member at One Million Mentors, a national charity connecting young people with mentors to help them realise their potential.

Shuab is now working at the Future Governance Forum.

Peter Hyman is a political strategist, educationalist, social entrepreneur and writer.

He is currently working on a project to counter right-wing populism as well as writing a Substack, Changing the Story. He was senior advisor to Sir Keir Starmer and a key figure in Labour's 2024 landslide General Election victory in the UK.

Peter worked for Sir Tony Blair for nine years including six years in 10 Downing Street, as political strategist, speechwriter, and Head of the Prime Minister's Strategic Communications Unit. He played a key part in the landslide election victories in the UK in 1997 and 2001.

Peter moved from politics to education, working first as a teaching assistant, then training as a history teacher before becoming headteacher and co-founder of a pioneering 4 to 18 state school in East London, School 21.

He became Co-CEO of a group of schools and co-founded - designed and built - a new primary school, School 360. He co-founded Voice 21, a charity which now works in more than 1000 schools across England, developing *oracy* – speaking skills – in young people.

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SUMMARY
KEY INSIGHTS

This essay is the result of workshops with more than **700 young people** across the country this year, in which search questions were asked about social media, politics, the state of Britain and their futures. Through these wide-ranging conversations, the authors tested the common narratives about young people today and came up with a series of key insights:

1. The rapid evolution of technology, and in particular its addictive nature, means that lumping 28 year olds and 16-years olds together and calling them Gen Z has little value.
2. Policy makers, politicians and parents should think of online content in three overlapping categories – the 3Hs: Healthy content that entertains, teaches or connects; Hyper content that appears positive, like fitness or self-improvement, but can slip into obsession or emotional strain; and Harmful content that spreads misogynistic or conspiratorial narratives. Understanding this framework is important for a more balanced view of the content young people are consuming online.
3. The moral panic about young people being slavish followers of untruthful news is way off the mark. In many cases, they are better informed and receive more balanced news than politically slanted newspaper readers.
4. Andrew Tate does not have a hold on young people. There are a range of influencers, many of whom provide guidance for self-improvement.
5. Pornography is as big a problem as social media, too easily accessible and makes young men too often inappropriate in dealing with young women. Every girl in one of the groups we spoke to had been sent unsolicited pornographic images. OnlyFans has blurred the line between entertainment and pornography in an unhealthy way.
6. Mainstream politicians are not communicating effectively with young people. Nigel Farage is not liked but admired for using social media and for his straight talking. Keir Starmer is not disliked, he is invisible.
7. 'Cancel culture' in schools is a problem. Schools have become scared of debating thorny issues and teachers shut them down too quickly.
8. Boys and girls are not at war as some would suggest. Each knows the other has it hard. Boys trying to live down the label of 'toxic masculinity' and girls still facing too much harassment.

9. Knife crime is the most commonly raised concern among young people. Young people across the country spoke about feeling unsafe and want it taken more seriously. That drives them to the comparative 'safety' of their on-line world at home. Knife crime is a symbol of politicians' inability to take the concerns of young people seriously.

10. Young people are craving more social connection and would welcome some kind of social media ban or controls as a forcing mechanism to get them doing other things.

INTRODUCTION
FRAMING THE PROJECT

Sixteen year olds are about to get the vote.

Yet we are told on a daily basis that this age group is adrift.

Corrupted by Andrew Tate. Addicted to porn. Lurching to the populist right. Giving up on democracy. Young men raging against the system.

But is any of this true? Has anyone actually listened to young people? Has anyone sat down with them, talked to them and truly heard what they've got to say?

We have done exactly that. We've been the length and breadth of the country listening hard to 16 -18 year olds in an attempt to find out what they really think.

We are from two very different backgrounds - a mid-fifties, white, ex-headteacher and political strategist from London, and a mid-twenties, black researcher from Manchester. We have travelled the country together, sharing ideas, challenging each other's thinking and seeking to understand the voices they have listened to.

We heard, beyond the screeching headlines and moral panic, a very different story emerging. A story ignored by the mainstream media.

We are told Andrew Tate is still the big thing. He's not. Bonnie Blue is.

We are told young people don't get any serious news. Wrong. They are consuming more balanced and varied news than many adults.

We are told they have given up on democracy. Wrong again. But they do want it to work a lot better.

This report will give parents a new perspective on what motivates young people. It will give politicians, policy makers and anyone with an interest in our future a new way of thinking about the challenges we all face. And it will give teachers a new way to open up much needed conversations in the classroom.

This generation has come of age through some of the most turbulent and transformative years in living memory, from the pandemic and the rise of AI, to a political system in flux, a collapsing information environment and the looming threat of climate breakdown. These events haven't just affected their lives, they have shaped their values, their confidence and their outlook on the world.

This is a generation that will have to work longer, retire later and carry the burden of an ageing population. It is in our national interest to ensure that as a society we are 'creating' a generation that can thrive and tackle humanity's greatest challenges.

Throughout this project, we have come to realise just how out of sync mainstream media is, particularly in political and policy circles, with the daily realities of Gen Z. Even within the

generation, the difference between early and late Gen Z is stark. The 16-year olds we spoke to live in a media ecosystem, emotional climate and political culture that most adults, even those just a few years older, barely recognise.

Talking to colleagues and friends about this work, we've been struck by how many seemingly "simple" insights felt astonishing to those outside the research. This report, we hope, will help bridge that gap. To bring the nuance of young people's voices to life. To inform, challenge and deepen public understanding. And to shed light on a generation that, yes, faces extraordinary challenges but still carries an audacious belief in a better future.

We chose this age group precisely because of that audacity. At 16, most have not yet been ground down by the full weight of adult life. There's something raw, searching and still hopeful about them. That makes their perspective vital to understand and worth listening to. This is also the age group that are likely to be voting for the first time at the next election.

This project is an attempt to get underneath the wild headlines and properly listen and understand what is going on in the minds of 16-18 year olds.

The results surprised us and we think will surprise others. It certainly surprised the teachers who were listening into the sessions. Students started opening up on issues that are normally kept under wraps at school.

What follows is intended to provide fresh insights and more nuance to a debate that is filled with a lot of heat and not much light.

WHAT WE DID

We went across the country to Northumberland, Sunderland, Sheffield, Manchester, Wigan, Oldham, Birmingham, Bristol, Uxbridge, Newham. We talked to students aged 16-18 of all backgrounds and classes. The project was meant to be qualitative in nature and does not represent a scientific, weighted, sample of young people.

We spoke to more than 700 young people, in workshops between 60 and 90 minutes long and involving between 30 and 90 young people.

We started with them filling in a questionnaire which they scanned with their mobile phones from a QR code.

We then started to open up questions for discussion - getting underneath the responses to the questionnaires.

In many of the sessions we divided the students up into girl and boy groups in order to delve further into some of the thornier and more controversial issues.

As a tool to aid discussions we asked the young people to speak into the microphone of a mobile phone. The act of holding this prop made the young people feel more confident to speak.

On the train home we debated intensely the findings of each session and then analysed the questionnaires.

Our discussions are reflected in this report and covered topics such as:

- Social media use
- Influencers
- Ideal role models
- Gender politics
- Democracy and politics
- The state and direction of the country
- The future

We want to thank the staff and students of all the schools and colleges we visited. We appreciate your openness and insights. We have not named the school because we promised anonymity. But we have referred to the location of the school.

THERE IS NO GEN Z
THE FIVE ARCHETYPES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Gen Z is the age group who are 15-28. It doesn't take much examination to realise this broad span of 13 years and the rapid advances in technology, makes lumping a 28-year old with a 15-year old slightly ridiculous.

Those who are nearly 30, who grew up surfing the Internet and still use Facebook, are very different in outlook from those who have been subjected to highly addictive social media, exemplified by TikTok.

The first wave of internet and social media use was greeted with optimism: the power of connecting with long lost friends or relatives. Googling the world's knowledge in seconds was liberating.

Now things are very different. The 'anxious generation' is a real thing. More and more insider accounts are revealing the full extent of the wilful and intentional policy of the big tech companies to hook young people onto something deeply addictive and damaging to mental health. Meta has been hit with dozens of lawsuits accusing it of deliberately designing Instagram to exploit young users' psychological vulnerabilities (Singer, 2024).

Governments across the world are beginning to ban social media for young people. Countries such as France, Australia and parts of the US are now taking serious steps to restrict or even ban social media for under-16s (Conroy, 2024).

To make sense of Gen Z and get underneath the headlines, the work of social media commentators Kyla Scanlon and Rachel Janfaza is useful. They describe three types of Gen Z:

- **Gen Z 1.0 (ages 23-28)** remembers flip phones - they are good on digital media but it does not dominate their lives. They graduated online because of the Covid lockdown.
- **Gen Z 1.5 (18-23)** are the Covid cohort. They learnt on-line, had many restrictions, and were in many cases traumatised by not going out. They are used to spending hours on-line.
- **Gen Z 2.0 (15-18)** are growing up with Tik Tok, hyper interactivity, addictive social media, and are using AI like Chat GPT routinely for school work.

We have focused on Gen Z 2.0 because understanding their world is going to be most useful as a window on how life and politics is going to change.

To avoid the blanket stereotyping of Gen Z, we designed five archetypes with the help of the young people themselves. Archetypes are archetypes, they are approximations, amalgamations, aggregates of traits and personalities. No one fits them perfectly. Most students saw themselves in more than one of the archetypes. But having tested them extensively with young people, we, and importantly they, felt the archetypes contributed to the debate.

THE FIVE ARCHETYPES:

THE ACTIVIST

Politics: Left-wing, socially progressive, environmentally conscious

Interests: Climate change, social justice, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism

Outlook on Life: Optimistic but frustrated with slow political change; believe in radical systemic reform and big changes to the way society is run

Lifestyle: Engage in protests, support ethical brands, involved in online activism, might vote Labour, Green, or a smaller leftist party

MEET ABI

Politics: Firmly progressive, votes Green when she can, Labour if she must. Sceptical of Westminster politics and deeply rooted in grassroots action.

Who she is: Abi is driven, principled and deeply empathetic. She cycles to school rain or shine because she sees climate action as part of her daily life. Her bag is stitched with causes she believes in, symbols of solidarity, not fashion statements. Whether it's campaigning to make her school more sustainable or organising local food bank drives, she channels her frustration into action.

Online presence: Her TikTok blends sharp political commentary with moments of hope and community. She explains issues like fast fashion, shares readings from feminist poetry nights and breaks down why public ownership matters. She believes it is important to show whose side you are on in big ethical battles and resents those who describe this as virtue signalling.

What she believes: Abi sees the climate crisis, gender equality and racial justice as inseparable. She is not interested in surface-level reforms. For her, real progress means reimagining the whole system, how we live, how we govern, and who gets heard.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKE ABI SAY IN OUR SESSIONS:

"They just don't care about us or the planet. They say they do, but if they did, things would have changed already."

"A lot of straight lads aren't as bothered about feminism as they should be. They think it's just about hating men, which isn't what it's about at all."

"If you've got money, you've got opportunity. It's not fair. That's why things need to change, not just fixed. Changed."

"There's this idea that we're all just online, but we care. We want to do something. We just don't know where to start sometimes."

THE ENTREPRENEUR

Politics: Centrist to right-leaning, pro-business, believes in meritocracy

Interests: Startups, side hustles, cryptocurrency, AI, financial independence

Outlook on Life: Opportunistic and individualistic; focused on personal success over systemic change

Lifestyle: Invests in stocks/crypto, follows business influencers, engaged in self-improvement and productivity culture

MEET AARON

Politics: Leans centre right, believes in personal responsibility, lower taxes and the power of innovation over government intervention. Not especially partisan, but admires politicians who "get things done."

Who he is: Aaron is ambitious and forward-thinking. He is not waiting for the system to work for him, he is already looking for ways to work around it. He listens to podcasts about passive income on the way to college and is halfway through building his own dropshipping business. He is more likely to quote Steven Bartlett than a political leader and sees Elon Musk as flawed but aspirational.

Outlook: He is not cynical, he just believes the best way to fix the world is to fix your own situation first. Aaron doesn't think protesting or voting changes much; what matters is discipline, mindset and execution. He admires figures who have built something from scratch and sees financial independence as the ultimate freedom.

Online presence: His algorithm feeds him a steady diet of money advice, mindset clips and hustle culture reels. He watches content on productivity, reads summaries of books like The Millionaire Fastlane and follows YouTubers who turn side hustles into six-figure incomes. His TikTok bio reads: "Don't complain. Compete."

Beliefs: Aaron believes the system is flawed, but sees no use waiting for it to change. He is sceptical of victimhood narratives and while not hostile to progressive causes, he often finds them distracting from what really matters: skill, strategy and self-belief. His favourite phrase? "Make your own luck."

WHAT PEOPLE LIKE AARON HAVE SAID IN OUR SESSIONS:

"Everyone wants to talk about what's wrong, but no one's trying to solve it. I'd rather learn how to win in the system than cry about it."

"School doesn't teach you how to actually make money. I've learned more from YouTube in the last year than I have in four years of lessons."

"I'm not political, I just think if you put the work in, you should get something out."

THE CRITICAL REALIST

Politics: Apathetic or anti-establishment, distrusts mainstream parties, often cynical and despondent

Interests: Memes, alternative media, conspiracies, gaming, dark humour

Outlook on Life: Feels powerless in a broken system; distrusts institutions, often disengaged from traditional politics

Lifestyle: Spends a lot of time online, sceptical of the news, more likely to engage in passive resistance than activism

MEET LIAM

Politics: Liam does not trust politicians. He is more likely to question the system than to vote in it.

Who he is: Liam is observant and deeply sceptical. He spends a lot of time online, often scrolling through meme pages, Reddit threads and alternative news accounts. He feels like the world is full of hypocrisy and that most people in power are out of touch or outright corrupt.

Outlook: He is not angry in a loud way but in a quiet way that lingers. He has lost faith in institutions of the state and the media and feels like the system is rigged no matter who is in charge. Rather than trying to change the world through politics he is more likely to tune out or call out contradictions through dark humour or irony.

Online presence: His feed is a mix of satire accounts, fringe media and conspiracy commentary. He might joke about the Matrix or poke fun at mainstream narratives but underneath the jokes is a deep sense of frustration and disillusionment.

Beliefs: Liam does not believe everything he reads but he also does not take anything at face value. He questions everything, especially authority. He is more likely to repost a meme that captures how broken the world feels than to join a protest about it.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKE LIAM HAVE SAID IN OUR SESSIONS:

"You're not getting anything from the government. So why would you care about voting?"

"I think the whole country is just sick and tired of being lied to and misled."

"I do not vote. I do not see the point. It is all rigged anyway."

"The media just shows you what they want you to believe. You have to go digging to find the truth."

THE TRADITIONALIST

Politics: Right-leaning, socially conservative, patriotic, possibly religious

Interests: History, British history and traditions, cultural preservation, Royalist

Outlook on Life: Believes the country has lost its way due to cultural and social changes; values tradition and order

Lifestyle: Supports Brexit, follows figures like Nigel Farage or GB News, may aspire to careers in the military or law enforcement

MEET BEN

Politics: Ben leans right and values order stability and pride in one's country. He is wary of fast cultural shifts and believes Britain should return to its roots.

Who he is: Ben is calm, grounded and reflective. He watches history videos on YouTube for fun and prefers old school values over what he sees as trendy ideologies. He also gets most of his news from YouTube or clips on TikTok, not from newspapers. He admires structure and discipline and often speaks about the importance of respect for community and national identity.

Outlook: He feels that modern Britain has lost something valuable. Whether it is the breakdown of family structures, the decline of patriotism or the rise of what he sees as divisive identity politics, Ben thinks we are drifting from what made the country strong.

Lifestyle: Ben supports Brexit and often tunes into GB News or listens to speeches by figures like Nigel Farage. He might not post much on social media but when he does it is usually to share a news article or a clip that aligns with his worldview. He is considering a future in the armed forces or the police. Regularly watches right wing streamers on Twitch.

Beliefs: For Ben tradition is not about going backwards but about holding on to what works. He sees cultural preservation as a form of protection and believes too many people dismiss heritage without understanding it.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKE BEN SAID IN OUR SESSIONS:

"We need more respect in this country. Everything is about tearing things down. What about building things back up?"

"Britain used to mean something. Now it feels like we are embarrassed to be British."

"Make Britain great again, it is a very patriotic message. You can see why some people would connect with that."

"I think there needs to be more respect in this country. Everyone is always trying to change everything, but some things are worth keeping."

THE CONNECTOR

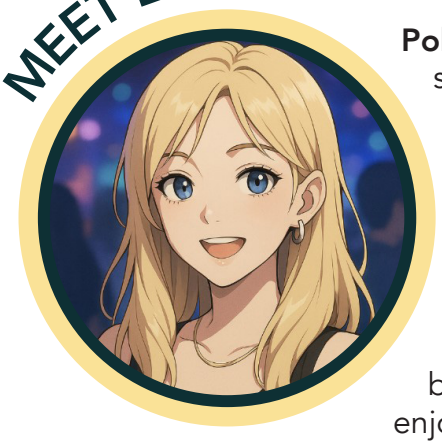
Politics: Believe people should live the life they want, disengaged from political discussions

Interests: Pop culture, reality TV, influencer trends, nightlife, social media

Outlook on Life: Focused on personal enjoyment, status, and social life over political issues

Lifestyle: Active on TikTok and Instagram, follows celebrity gossip, more concerned with lifestyle trends than political debates.

MEET ELLA



Politics: Ella does not follow politics closely. She thinks people should be able to live how they want without being judged or dragged into debates.

Who she is: Ella is vibrant and social and always in the loop. She is the first to hear about the latest trend on TikTok. Her world is fast-paced and driven by moments of connection and self-expression.

Outlook: She is not interested in arguments or ideology. She believes life is stressful enough already and chooses to focus on enjoying the present. That does not mean she does not care, just that she finds more meaning in community fun and personal growth than in party politics.

Online presence: Ella posts regularly on Instagram and is always up to date with influencers and celebrity news. Her stories are filled with photos from nights out, aesthetic edits and reposts from creators she admires.

Beliefs: Ella believes everyone should be able to do what makes them happy. She is wary of people who act morally superior and avoids judgmental spaces online and offline. Politics feels heavy to her so she opts out of it when she can.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKE ELLA SAID IN OUR SESSIONS:

"I just want to live my life and not get dragged into stuff I can't change."

"Everyone argues about politics online but nothing actually happens. I would rather focus on myself and my people."

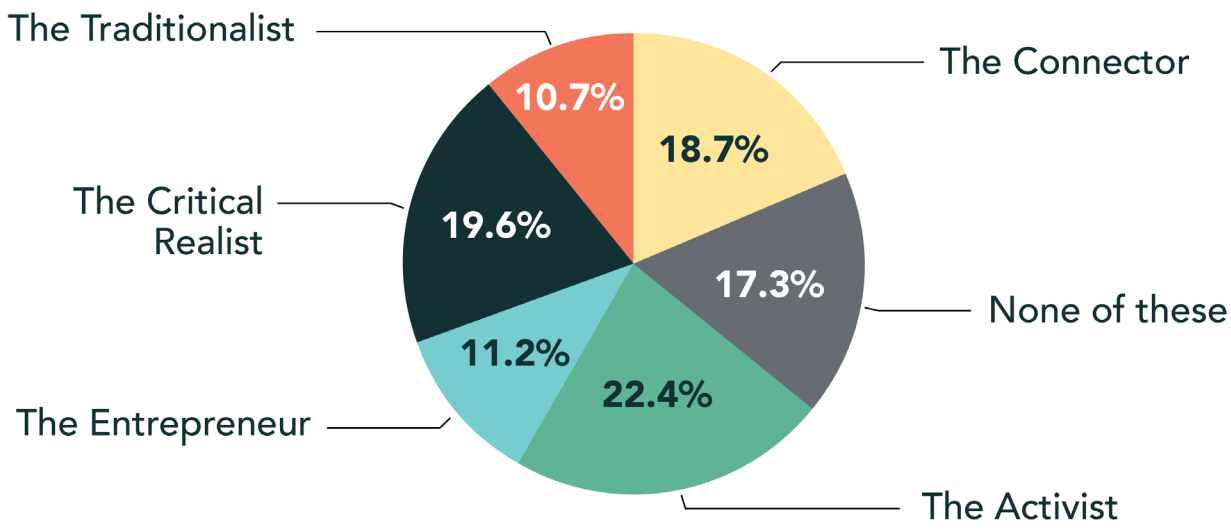
"Anything that's trending, like if something big happens in Gaza or Ukraine, I'll see it on Instagram. But I'm not going to go look for it."

STUDENTS THOUGHTS ON THE ARCHETYPES

FIGURE 1

Which of the archetypes do you think is closest to fitting you?

214 responses



The students were thoughtful about these archetypes.

We conducted a separate survey halfway through the research, based on the archetypes that had been co-created with students in earlier sessions. When asked how well the framework reflected reality, almost 75% felt the archetypes were "*very accurate*" or "*somewhat accurate*".

The majority thought they were useful and that they were a big improvement on the Gen Z generalisations.

One boy in Wigan summed this up. *"They're better than what we have now in public debate. Better than 'left vs right' or 'woke vs racist.'"*

Another said: *"They're a useful tool to start a conversation but only if we remember they're not fixed labels."*

Out of 214 responses, young people split fairly evenly across the five archetypes: 22% identified most with the Activist, 19.6% with the Connector, 18.7% with the Critical Realist, 17.3% with the Entrepreneur and 10.7% with the Traditionalist. Only 11% said none of the archetypes fit them.

Most students wanted to stress their individuality, that no archetype would fully match their quirks.

"I didn't know where I would put myself, I'm a mix of two or three."

"Most people are not purely one thing. You can be into politics and pop culture. Why does it have to be either-or?"

"I'm a mix of activist and connector. I care about LGBTQ+ rights, but I also like TikTok and pop culture. That doesn't make me less politically aware."

We asked the students if there was an archetype missing. Most thought there wasn't. There were a few suggestions including one who said that punk students should be better represented.

Other suggestions included:

"Make it more of a spectrum, not boxes."

"Add a centrist archetype, or someone who's realistic but not political."

"Add people who just don't care about politics or who only care because of TikTok. That's a real category."

"There should be something for people who take ideas from others, not out of ignorance, but because they're figuring it out. Maybe call it 'the learner' or 'the pragmatist.'"

What is clear is that whether thinking about Gen Z through their use of technology (Gen Z 1.0, 1.5 and 2.0) or through the archetypes, we need to start treating young people - not as one block of people who are up to no good - but as a generation with multiple perspectives that need to be properly understood.

ANDREW TATE IS DEAD
INSIDE THE MEDIA WORLDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Is Andrew Tate corrupting young men? What does it mean to be influenced in 2025? These are the questions this chapter tries to answer. Based on our research, in which we asked people to name who influences them, we mapped out five key types of influencer shaping how Gen Z thinks: entertainers, adult content creators, news explainers, right-wing thinkers, and left-wing voices. From MrBeast to Bonnie Blue, Jordan Peterson to HasanAbi, these figures are often the real teachers, therapists, and reference points for a generation trying to make sense of a chaotic world.

When we first started thinking about this project, we did what most people do, we began by reading. Articles, comment pieces, think-tank reports, X/BlueSky threads. And everywhere we looked, one name dominated the conversation: Andrew Tate.

He was treated as the answer to every question about young men and social media. How do we explain the rise in misogyny? Tate. Why are teenage boys disillusioned? Tate. What's behind the anti-feminist backlash? Tate. To read the discourse at the time, you'd be forgiven for thinking Andrew Tate was a one man radicalisation machine.

But then we actually started talking to young people. And very quickly, we realised something important. Tate is dead.

Not literally, of course. But in the way young people use the term "*dead*", meaning irrelevant, finished, past it. He came up in sessions, but not with the same weight the media gives him. Some students rolled their eyes. Others described him as *"just a meme now."* His content still echoes around the internet, but his grip on young people's attention isn't what it once was. We are not trying to undermine his relevance, he was a first mover, but he's not the main act anymore. Tate is cable TV, loud, outdated, but still around; however, most young people are streaming on Netflix or scrolling TikTok.

When we say 'influencer', we don't just mean someone with millions of followers or a blue tick. It's anyone who shows up on your feed often enough to shape how you think, feel or act. You don't have to follow them. You don't even have to like them. If their content keeps appearing and starts to stick, they're influencing you.

What we found instead was a far more complicated, fragmented, and dynamic landscape. Young people today are immersed in a constant stream of content. On average, they watch nearly five to six hours of video a day, much of it on mobile; scrolling, swiping, and absorbing without pause. Young people are not following one person's 'ideology'. They follow and are 'influenced' by tens if not hundreds of creators. Their feeds are shaped by algorithms, not loyalty. They scroll from a MrBeast giveaway to a Bonnie Blue thirst trap, then onto a Jordan Peterson rant about how Mark Carney is the devil reincarnated, a News Daddy news clipping, or a HasanAbi protest livestream, all within a matter of minutes.

One student said it best: *"I don't follow one person. It's more like, whoever the algorithm throws at me."* Another said: *"Even if you don't want to see certain people, they'll still come up. You don't choose who influences you."*

This chapter came out of that realisation. We wanted to move beyond moral panic about Tate and actually look at who young people are engaging with now in their real daily scrolling habits. That includes people they admire, people they argue with and people they never asked to see but end up watching anyway.

In the pages that follow, we break down six key types of influencer shaping this generation's worldview.

We are conscious that the influencer landscape we describe may appear heavily gendered. That is not a reflection of our selection but of what surfaced most clearly in our research. Across our survey and school conversations, gender emerged as one of the strongest dividing lines shaping how young people see the online world. The names that came up again and again were overwhelmingly male, a reflection of who dominates the digital spaces young people inhabit. Boys were far more likely to mention influencers such as IShowSpeed, MrBeast or Andrew Tate, while girls were more likely to reference traditional A-list celebrities such as Taylor Swift, Selena Gomez or Bella Hadid. The aesthetics and communities surrounding these figures are explicitly gendered.

What struck us most, however, was that young people rarely called this out. Across hundreds of workshops, almost no one questioned the gender balance of the figures mentioned. The highly gendered nature of the online world has become normalised and is a defining feature of digital culture shaping how boys and girls understand power, attention and identity.

THE ENTERTAINERS (MRBEAST AND ISHOWSPEED): *"It's just always on"*

Ask almost any 16-year-old who dominates their feed, and they won't mention Keir Starmer or Kemi Badenoch. It'll be MrBeast (Jimmy Donaldson), or IShowSpeed (Darren Watkins Jr.), or another influencer just like them. Each has an audience in the millions, some, nearly a billion. MrBeast is now the most subscribed individual on YouTube with over 400 million followers. IShowSpeed's videos have been watched more than 4.4 billion times (SocialBlade, 2025).

They dominate the attention economy. And it's no accident. MrBeast has built an entire empire by mastering the psychology of YouTube. His internal team manual opens with a simple truth: *"Your goal here is to make the best YouTube videos possible. Not the funniest, not the best looking. The best YouTube videos."*

That means understanding how attention works - how long people stay, when they drop off and how to pull them back in. His team tracks viewership by the second, optimising every frame to hold the viewer.

"The first minute of each video is the most important."

"You must always know what minute mark the content you're working on is."

It works. Whether you're subscribed or not, whether you're interested or not, their content finds you.

And the content is all about competition. He sets up situations where you are desperate to know what happens next or who wins: 100 kids versus the world's strongest man. The world's fastest car versus a cheetah. Survive 30 days chained to your ex.

A student from Sheffield summed it up perfectly:

"They're not something you choose. They're just always on. It's like background noise."

And because of the scale of their audiences, these influencers shape how young people think about humour, masculinity, status - even politics, indirectly. MrBeast calls it the *"wow factor"*- content so distinctive and over-the-top that no one else can replicate it.

"Spectacles are videos that only the MrBeast channel can do."

"You can't fake intensity in videos."

And that's what sticks. Not the policy. Not the press release. But the feeling of speed, scale and endless stimulation. And young people from 10 upwards get hooked.

IShowSpeed is the opposite in tone but just as omnipresent. He's chaotic, impulsive, occasionally outrageous, but magnetic. *"Speed is dumb but hilarious,"* one Manchester student laughed. *"You watch him because anything might happen."*

But even they acknowledged the limits: *"He says stuff you'd get cancelled for in real life."*

So why does this matter? Because in a vacuum of meaningful adult leadership, figures such as MrBeast and Speed become something more than entertainers. They become reference points for power, personality and presence. And even when they're not talking about politics, they're shaping how young people feel about the world.

Take Speed's recent trip to China. For an influencer known for his wild style, it was a bold move visiting a country often seen in the West as a strategic and undemocratic rival and sharing his experiences directly with his audience.

Young people flooded the comments:

"Speed changed my view of China."

"They don't start wars. They build things."

"This is the future."

The comments of young people were not making a judgement on China's authoritarian regime, they were showing their admiration for a country that could build things quickly and get things done. A stark contrast, perhaps, to what they currently feel about their own country.

This is the power of creators. They are able to reframe things and shape expectations about what power or competence looks like.

As one Bristol student put it: *"It's not about politics. It's about who looks like they've got their shit together."*

TRADITIONAL SUPERSTARS (TAYLOR SWIFT, SELENA GOMEZ, CRISTIANO RONALDO, BELLA HADID)

Even in the age of 'new media', the 'old' kind of fame still matters. The likes of Selena Gomez, Cristiano Ronaldo and Bella Hadid are still relevant. While other types of influencers, such as the 'Entertainment Creators' we highlighted, might be all over social media at a given time, their presence is not always long term like that of traditional superstars. They represent something steady.

Swift can post a blurry rehearsal clip and send fans into a frenzy. Ronaldo can upload a gym photo and reach more people than most media outlets. They project control and success and confidence. As one student from Sunderland put it talking about Ronaldo:

"He's got a lot of charisma… he appeals to people because he looks strong and confident…"

What sets these figures apart is that they do not need to fight for attention. Their fame comes from skill, longevity and personality. Swift fills stadiums because of the music, Ronaldo because of the football, Bella Hadid because of her place in fashion. Their audiences are not casual viewers scrolling past, they are invested, loyal and often lifelong.

Traditional celebrities operate on a different rhythm to the rest of the internet. They do not have to post every day or chase virality to stay relevant. They set the pace and the world reacts around them. Their fame feels earned, built over time and that gives it a kind of weight that influencers rarely have. For a generation used to instant fame and overnight trends, that slow-burn power still feels magnetic.

The continuing importance of traditional celebrities is a reflection that there's quite a lot about teenage life today that would be very recognisable to previous generations.

ONLINE ADULT INFLUENCERS: BONNIE BLUE, ONLYFANS, AND SEXUALISED CONTENT

If we are serious about understanding the world young people live in, we need to pay more attention to the explosion of sexually explicit influencer culture. Many creators slip easily between everyday vlogging and explicit adult material. This is reshaping how young people think about sex, intimacy and their own self worth.

OnlyFans is a UK founded subscription platform where creators share exclusive content directly with paying fans, with an estimated 70 to 80 percent of content categorised as adult entertainment. In 2023, the platform generated approximately £1.04 billion in revenue and paid its owner £472 million in dividends (Thomas, 2025).

The story of Bonnie Blue is perhaps the clearest example of this new, complicated digital reality. At 25, she left a recruitment job in Derbyshire to become an OnlyFans creator, making headlines for earning over £600,000 per month from sexually explicit videos, often involving young men described as *"barely legal"*, leading to critics accusing her of being a predator. In one widely shared stunt she claimed to have slept with 1,000 men in 12 hours for a single video, an act designed to dominate online feeds. Her appearance on ITV's This Morning shocked viewers but it also forced mainstream audiences to confront a reality that young people already take for granted (Wright, 2024). Sex work is not hidden away on obscure corners of the internet anymore; it sits just a click away from TikTok or Instagram.

In our listening sessions, young people frequently referenced encountering OnlyFans content, often unintentionally. One boy from Sheffield described what he saw as the new normal: *"OnlyFans models are role models now for young girls. They can just take a picture and whack it online and make 50 quid."* To him and to many others we spoke to, the rise of platforms like OnlyFans signals a shift, where sex work is framed as easy and lucrative and no longer a fringe taboo.

Young men in particular expressed concern that the line between normal content and explicit material is increasingly blurred. A student in Sheffield explained it clearly: *"It's literally everywhere now. You can be scrolling on Instagram and suddenly you're watching someone who's basically an OnlyFans model. It's not even something you choose."*

Another participant from Sheffield described the influence as pervasive but subtle: *"It's weird because you don't go looking for it. It's just there, linked in everyone's bio. Like everyone's doing it."*

The result is a generation that is both hyper exposed to sexualised content and increasingly desensitised to its commercialisation. This shift is directly reflected in OnlyFans' recent growth (Berg, 2025).

Beyond the sheer numbers, the real question that kept coming up in our sessions was about impact. A young woman at a college in Oldham described the pressure clearly, *"Everyone sees girls making thousands on OnlyFans and it makes you wonder why you're bothering with uni and debt."*

Young men echoed this, not just in admiration or curiosity, but in frustration, uncertainty and even confusion. A student in Bristol put it bluntly, *"Guys start to think this is how relationships work, just pay a subscription and it's sorted."*

THE NEWS AGGREGATORS (DYLAN PAGE AKA NEWS DADDY): *"I don't read news, I watch TikTok"*

For a lot of young people, TikTok isn't just for memes and music, it's how they get their news. Traditional media? Too slow. Too stiff. Too far removed from their lives. That gap has been filled by creators like Dylan Page, better known as News Daddy, who's become one of the most recognisable political explainers on social media.

He's not a journalist in the traditional sense, but to his 15.4 million followers and 1.3 billion likes, that doesn't really matter. He delivers global headlines with clarity and speed and neutrality, all in under a minute and makes it feel like you're learning something just by scrolling. To put it in context, News Daddy now dwarfs the TikTok presence of the BBC (7.8m followers / 340.1m likes), Sky News (8m / 260.8m), CNN (8.9m / 320m) and GB News (1.9m / 68.4m). And for those who want something more substantial, he does longer news broadcasts on YouTube at between 8 and 20 minutes length, though these get fewer viewers.

A student in Bristol summed up the appeal: *"You get everything in under a minute. Why would I watch a 30 minute news show when I've got News Daddy?"* Another student from Sheffield added: *"It's not always right, but it's always quick."* That is the trade off, speed over substance, clarity over complexity.

It's not just about convenience, it's about trust. Although some young people expressed scepticism toward traditional outlets, our wider data shows that most still place more trust in mainstream media than social media. We will break down those findings in more detail later in the report. But the perception remains: TikTok creators like Dylan Page are seen by many as more relatable, more current and more honest, even if they are not always accurate.

A student in Manchester put it well: *"You feel informed because you know the headlines, but really you're getting a tiny slice. You don't know if it's true or if it's just trending."* It's a powerful point.

Dylan Page, like many of the influencers we explore in this chapter, blurs the line between roles. On the one hand, he plays the part of a straight-talking news presenter, the kind you might have seen on TV in the 90s, but repackaged for TikTok. On the other, he's very much an internet personality. While most of his content is news focused, he also takes part in typical influencer culture: posting lifestyle content, engaging with trends and even appearing on a YouTube reality series called Locked In alongside other viral creators. It's this dual identity, part anchor, part entertainer, that makes him so effective with young audiences and so difficult for traditional media to understand or replicate.

THE PODCAST BROS (JORDAN PETERSON): *"He tells you to sort your life out"*

Jordan Peterson is not your typical influencer. A 62-year old Canadian professor of psychology, he doesn't do dance trends or viral pranks and he doesn't stream from his bedroom or try to go viral with memes. But his influence, especially among young men, is just as significant. He speaks in long sentences, references Jung and the Bible and yet somehow still makes it into the TikTok feeds of 16-year-old boys trying to figure out who they are.

A student from Birmingham said it plainly: *"He tells you to sort your life out … clean your room, be disciplined. That's attractive when nobody else is really talking to you."* Another, from Oldham, added: *"Peterson says stuff about men having it tough and no one else says that without getting in trouble."*

Peterson's appeal is not just about self help. He offers a whole worldview, one where gender roles are biologically fixed, 'chaos' is to be avoided and traditional responsibility is the path to meaning. For many boys feeling lost or uncertain, it's a powerful message. It feels like a life raft,

but it comes with baggage. His worldview often mixes therapy with grievance and his content frequently veers into political and cultural territory, from critiques of feminism to defences of traditional hierarchies.

This is where he overlaps with what's often called the '*manosphere*' - a loose online network of content creators, influencers and forums that promote a particular vision of masculinity, often focused on discipline, self-improvement and resistance to progressive social norms.

A female student in Bristol flagged what often happens when boys go deep into his content: *"You know when guys watch Peterson because suddenly they're talking about feminism like it's ruining their lives."* What starts as advice can harden into ideology and once it does, it becomes harder to challenge or question.

What's especially notable is how Peterson shows up in young people's media worlds. They're not usually watching his two hour podcasts, they're seeing him in 30 second clips posted by 'alpha male' accounts on Instagram and TikTok. These are pages aimed at young men that promote a vision of being dominant, disciplined and stoic, often framed as the opposite of being 'soft' or emotional. These motivational pages mash his speeches together with weightlifting montages, Tate style soundbites, or cold shower routines. He's no longer just a professor, he's become a voice in a much larger online ecosystem that blends content about masculinity, anti 'woke' talking points, and philosophy.

It may seem like a contradiction but he is also prone to crying when talking about the problems young men face, often visibly emotional in interviews or speeches when describing their struggles. He started out making the case for free speech and the dangers of the government forcing people to use people's preferred pronouns, for example; arguments that, whether or not you agreed with them, had a reasoning. Ten years later, he seems like a different figure: more bitter, more combative and increasingly defined by what he's against. His many public controversies and repeated *"cancellations"* haven't mellowed him, they've pushed him deeper into the culture war. He isn't just a conservative professor, he's now become a political actor.

Peterson straddles a unique position in the digital space: part academic, part influencer, part political figure. He brings 'intellectual weight' to a set of ideas that are often deeply emotional for young men, about order, control, strength and identity. For a generation that feels adrift, he offers something that feels solid. Whether that solidity helps them grow or narrows their worldview, is the real question.

THE LEFT-WING STREAMERS (HASANABI): *"Funny, relatable and actually knows his stuff"*

At the other end of the ideological spectrum sits HasanAbi (Hasan Piker), one of the most prominent left-wing political streamers on the internet. A former journalist at The Young Turks, he's built a massive following, by mixing gaming, pop culture and progressive political commentary. He streams for hours a day on Twitch and YouTube, reacting to news events in real time, offering takes on everything from U.S. elections to international politics and regularly speaking on subjects such as the war in Gaza.

Students who mentioned him in our sessions did so with enthusiasm. A student from Sheffield described him as, *"Funny, relatable and actually knows his stuff."* Another from Bristol added *"He's not just angry or ranting, he's explaining things…. he debunks all the right-wing stuff that pops up."* That sense of clarity, wrapped in humour and cultural fluency, is central to his appeal.

HasanAbi is proof that young people do want to engage politically, they just don't want to be talked down to. His popularity shows that progressive ideas can thrive online, but only when they're delivered in a way that feels authentic, sharp and plugged into the internet's rhythm.

He watches the same memes, follows the same creators and talks like someone from inside the 'culture', not above it.

That said, students also recognised the limits of his format. A student from Bristol pointed out, *"Even though he's good, he's still just one guy, you're only getting his take."*

Alongside streamers like Hasan, there's a growing appetite for more accessible, mainstream economic explainers and few have had as big an impact as Gary Stevenson, known online as Gary's Economics. A former trader turned economic commentator, Gary breaks down complex financial and political issues in plain language, often using a whiteboard and a single camera. His videos go viral not because they're flashy, but because they make sense of the cost-of-living crisis, inequality and political choices in a way that feels grounded and real. He's become a go-to voice for many young people trying to understand why everything feels so rigged and what, if anything, can be done about it.

HasanAbi represents something valuable in the wider media ecosystem, a counterweight to the right-wing masculine influencers who dominate so many feeds. In a media landscape where young people are desperate for honesty and relevance, he's figured out how to make progressive politics watchable. And that is no small feat.

THE 'LOBBY' IS THE NEW PLAYGROUND: GAMING AND STREAMING AS THE NEW SOCIAL SPACE

To really understand influence, we also need to leave the social media timelines and look at another major arena of digital life, gaming and streaming. Platforms like Twitch and YouTube Live aren't side notes to the influencer economy, they're central to it. And the lobbies, livestreams and comment sections that surround games like FIFA or Fortnite have become new kinds of public squares, places where young people hang out and decompress together. What happens in those spaces matters, often just as much as what happens on TikTok or Instagram.

For a lot of young people today, *"hanging out"* doesn't mean going outside. It means games like Call of Duty, Fortnite and FIFA have become not just entertainment, but the main social setting after school. Friends play together from different houses, cities, even time zones, meeting up in digital lobbies much like they would have once met at the park.

*"It's how I chill with my mates. Like, I'll finish dinner, go online and we'll just talk sh** for hours,"* one student from Oldham explained. That kind of casual intimacy is increasingly rare in offline life and it's part of why gaming matters. It offers a space that feels both social and safe, where young people can talk and just be themselves. Dr Jamie Woodcock, a UK academic who studies game cultures, points out that online games aren't just play. They're platforms for identity, conversation and even informal work (Woodcock and Johnson, 2017).

According to Ofcom's 2023 report, 96 percent of UK boys aged 12 to 15 play video games in some form, with many gaming online with others (Ofcom, 2023).

While gaming still has a male skew, it's far from a boys only world. Female streamers like Amouranth, Valkyrae and Pokimane have built huge audiences, often blending gaming content with lifestyle, fashion and chat. Some have leaned into a more sexualised persona, which has sparked debate about whether they're exploiting the algorithm or simply playing the system.

Gaming Streamers

Many young people aren't just playing games. They're watching others play. That's where Twitch, YouTube Live and Kick come in. These platforms have turned gameplay into performance. Streams can last hours and it's that length, the feeling of being there for the highs, the lows, the rants and the silences, that builds intimacy between viewer and streamer.

IShowSpeed and MrBeast are central figures here. Speed, in particular, is deeply rooted in gaming culture. His FIFA streams draw thousands of live viewers, not because of the football tips, but because of the drama. Fans don't just watch his wins. They watch him lose, scream, laugh, apologise and try again. That vulnerability is the appeal.

Live Sport Streamers

Then there's the quieter side of streaming. Football watchalongs. It's not just about watching Manchester United play. It's about watching Mark Goldbridge watch Manchester United play. A former police officer turned YouTuber, Goldbridge now streams to over two million subscribers on The United Stand. His matchday meltdowns have become cultural events in themselves. Viewers don't just tune in for punditry. They tune in to feel less alone, to share the experience of winning, losing and shouting at the screen.

Arsenal fans have their own version with AFTV. Originally just a camera outside the stadium, it's now a full blown brand with live shows, sponsorships and millions of subscribers. These fan led communities are informal media outlets.

There's also something more emotional going on. A student at UTC Sheffield said, *"Sometimes I'll just watch people play because it feels like I'm playing with them."* Another in Wigan mentioned watching FIFA YouTubers *"just so it feels like there's someone else around."* That really stayed with us. Because it's not just about content. It's about company.

Streaming culture is also tangled up with loneliness. Especially post-Covid, especially among young men. When 'real world' connection is harder to find, watching someone on screen in real time becomes a way to feel less isolated. You're not just watching someone, you're with someone.

Whether it's Speed raging at a missed goal, Pokimane chatting through her evening routine, or Goldbridge dissecting a VAR decision, these streamers are part of young people's daily emotional lives. Not because they're delivering deep insight, but because they're a companion.

‘WE KNOW WE CAN’T BELIEVE WHAT’S ON TIKTOK’

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD

If we want to understand how young people form their views about politics, identity and the world around them, we need to understand how they use social media. Not just what platforms they are on but how those platforms function in their lives.

Social media is not just a tool young people use to pass the time. It is where they learn, argue, reflect and decide. It is the setting where opinions are formed and sometimes hardened. If we ignore how that happens, we miss one of the most powerful forces shaping the political attitudes of a generation.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Before going further, it is worth clarifying a few of the terms that kept coming up in our sessions.

The feed: When young people talk about “*the feed,*” they are usually referring to the main page on apps like TikTok or Instagram where content appears automatically. On TikTok, this is called the For You Page; a personalised, never ending stream of videos recommended by an algorithm based on your past behaviour. You don’t actively choose what appears, It appears for you.

The algorithm: The term “*the algorithm*” refers to the system behind the feed. It watches what you watch, how long you pause, what you like and what you comment on and then feeds you more of what it thinks will keep you scrolling. It does not care whether you agree or disagree.

The matrix: And then there’s “*the Matrix.*” Not the film. But the idea, pushed by influencers that society is being controlled by hidden elites who do not want you to think for yourself. When young people say things like *“I don’t trust the Matrix”* or *“They’re trying to control you,”* they’re often talking about governments, schools, or media organisations that they believe are hiding the truth or forcing a certain worldview.

"It's always on. It's part of everything."

For many young people, social media is not something they log into, it is something they live in. One student from Bristol described it simply: *"I'll be scrolling in the morning before I have even brushed my teeth. It's how I wake up."* Another added that even when they are not online, they are still thinking about it, what might be waiting, what they'll check later.

Social media use flows between platforms without clear boundaries. Students often described bouncing from TikTok to Instagram to YouTube, following a chain of comments or recommendations. A student in Manchester described it as *"a spiral but a useful one,"* saying, *"I might start with a random video and end up watching something serious about Palestine or the economy. It's not planned, but it kind of works."*

Much of what young people learn online is not sought out. *"It's not like I'm trying to find the news or anything, but it just shows up,"* said one student. Content about politics, economics or social issues gets woven into everything else. You might be watching a nostalgic Beckham freekick or a cold tomato soup recipe video and suddenly, a video appears breaking down government policy. Information filters in quietly, often absorbed without question, regardless of where it came from.

"You don't really get a choice."

Young people were clear about how little control they have over what they see. Many described the algorithm as a force that learns from their slightest actions, *"You don't really get a choice. It's not like YouTube where you click what you want. It's just there."* The irony being that Youtube also has an algorithm but it is much more subtle about it.

They also understood how emotional manipulation drives engagement. Social media platforms reward content that provokes a reaction and students were acutely aware of how creators exploit this. Posts that trigger outrage, shock or strong disagreement are more likely to be pushed to wider audiences because they generate comments, shares and watch time. This tactic, often called *"rage bait"*, was a recurring theme in our conversations. As one student put it: *"They don't care if it's true. They just want it to blow up"*, meaning go viral and grab attention.

This kind of manipulation is not limited to political content. Emotional triggers of all kinds, anger, sexual attraction, humour, even confusion are used to hook viewers and keep them scrolling. One common example students pointed to was the use of *"thirst traps"*: images or videos designed to attract attention through physical appeal. These videos are increasingly being paired with unrelated or serious messages, capitalising on the initial emotional draw to deliver a different kind of content altogether.

"You get the headline from TikTok. But you don't trust it on its own."

Despite the intensity of their usage, most students didn't express blind trust in what they saw online. Instead, they described something closer to strategic scepticism. TikTok might introduce a story, but many would go to Google or Reddit to confirm the details. A few checked BBC, Sky News or Al Jazeera pages, depending on what felt most balanced.

"BBC feels official but filtered. TikTok feels raw but messy."

When asked who they trusted more (mainstream media or social media) the answer was rarely absolute. Traditional outlets were seen as more credible but also out of touch. Social media was chaotic, often inaccurate but more reflective of how people actually talk and feel.

The moral panic about young people being slavish followers of untruthful news is way off the mark. In answer to a polling question, young people might say they get their news from social media. But the reality, as we discovered, was that many had BBC notifications on, still watched the news on TV with their parents and regularly Googled things they thought were untrue on TikTok.

And you could easily make the case that the sixty year old whose main source of news is the Daily Telegraph is getting a far more slanted daily diet than the 16-year old, who is grazing many media outlets and is fact checking and piecing together a set of differing views.

"You don't choose who influences you."

For many young people, social media is not just a place where they absorb opinions, it is where they form them. Scrolling becomes part of how they think. Rather than arriving with a fixed perspective, they observe how others react, read through comment sections and gradually shape their own views. As one student explained, *"It's not just watching, it's reading the comments. That's where you actually see both sides."*

This process is far from passive but it isn't entirely controlled either. Young people are actively engaging but within a system designed to keep them reacting. Their beliefs take shape in an environment driven by algorithms, emotional cues and a constant stream of content that rarely stops. It can be overwhelming, unclear and contradictory, but still feels essential. In a world where clarity is hard to find, being part of the conversation is what matters most.

Comment sections are where many young people say they form their opinions. They scroll through videos but then dive into the comments to *"see both sides,"* weigh perspectives or look for the general mood. But this process is often happening in a space that isn't neutral. One student put it bluntly: *"You go in the comments and half of it sounds fake. Like it's just people trying to start fights."* Another added, *"Sometimes it feels like they want you to think a certain way, but you don't know who's even real."*

Comment sections are increasingly vulnerable to foreign interference and disinformation campaigns. Bot accounts, coordinated troll farms and anonymous bad faith actors often push narratives under the surface of viral content. What looks like a spontaneous consensus can be manufactured.

The danger here is that many young people trust the comment section as a kind of informal temperature check on public opinion. But when that space is polluted with inauthentic or coordinated posts, it warps perception. If we're encouraging young people to *"do their own research,"* we also need to teach them how manipulated some of that research space can be.

HOW POLITICIANS APPEAR ON SOCIAL MEDIA (AND WHY IT MATTERS)

Long before many young people engage with a politician's policies, they have already encountered their persona through memes, funny edits, out-of-context clips, or TikToks stitched into completely unrelated content. This often is not about messaging. It's about the 'vibe'.

Nigel Farage, for example, is regularly clipped in absurd moments. He says things like *"I'm a nutter"* or walks into pubs to cheers. Donald Trump appears in sped-up videos paired with drill music or anime soundtracks.

One student put it like this:

"I don't really care about Trump's views, but some of the videos are just hilarious. Like, the way he talks. It's like a character."

Another student from Birmingham said:

"Farage has funny moments. Not like I agree with him, but he's got meme energy."

This kind of exposure shapes political identity before policy even enters the room. As one student noted, you see the memes before you see the man. These clips are often users' first exposure to a candidate, not an interview or a debate, but a viral video with no context.

This is not a new phenomenon, Ed Miliband's infamous bacon sandwich photo arguably did more to shape public perception than many of his speeches. While some of this can make politicians feel more human, it also makes it harder to separate satire from reality. As one student described:

"You laugh at them so much, you don't even know if they are serious anymore."

WHO HAS IT HARDER, MEN OR WOMEN?

Who has it harder, men or women? We asked this question because recent debates in education and youth policy have suggested that the strong focus on supporting girls over the past two decades has sometimes come at the expense of boys. Some reports even link this to the rise in misogynistic behaviour among young men, framing it as a backlash to progress on gender equality. We wanted to test this assumption and spark honest conversations in schools about the different pressures facing both genders.

What we found was that this debate struck a chord. It was one of the most emotionally charged questions we asked. Young men are currently at the centre of national concern. Some 58% of girls go to university, and only 38% of boys. Boys are underperforming in school, face higher suicide rates and are often caught between calls to "*man up*" and accusations of toxicity.

When we asked students across the UK, the overwhelming majority, 75.6% felt that women still have it harder. They pointed to ongoing workplace inequality, social expectations and the ever-present threat of harassment.

Young people recognise that both men and women are facing real, but different pressures. Girls grow up navigating misogyny. Being likeable but not weak, ambitious but not aggressive. Boys are often unsure of what it means to be a man in 2025. Be tough, but not aggressive. Be vulnerable, but not weak. Be kind, but assert yourself. Young men find it a minefield.

GIRLS BELIEVE THEY FACE STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY THAT IS NOT GOING AWAY

For all the noise about progress, most young people we spoke to were clear, being a girl still comes with barriers.

The majority of respondents in our survey said women continue to face deeper structural and societal challenges than men. Yes, more women are going to university. Yes, many of them speak confidently about ambition and independence. But behind that, there's still a grinding sense that the system wasn't built with them in mind.

Students across the country pointed to a world where success is still shaped by gendered expectations. In Bristol, one respondent put it starkly: *"It's harder to climb the corporate ladder due to childbirth, maternity leave and possibly having to go part time… this could lead to them having to rely on their partner for income."* Another said: *"Women are more likely to find it harder to be employed or get a job that's financially stable. And there's still a gender pay gap."*

The problem is not just economic, it's cultural. Girls told us they are often undermined or dismissed. *"Women are misunderstood, not listened to, or their intelligence is constantly undermined,"* one said. In politics, the absence of women in leadership still speaks volumes. *"Labour have never had a female leader. That really shows how women still have it harder in politics."*

Over and over, we heard stories of girls navigating invisible pressures, to be likeable but not weak, ambitious but not aggressive. A student in Bristol said, *"Women are judged more quickly and expected to do more just to be seen as equal. You're fighting stereotypes all the time."* At a school in Bristol, one girl added, *"Even when society seems 'equal,' we're still living in a system where law and family structures were designed to benefit men."*

BOYS ARE STRUGGLING BUT IN DIFFERENT WAYS

While many agreed that women face deeper structural barriers, they also expressed concern and some sympathy for the emotional and psychological challenges facing boys. These were not dismissed as less serious, but understood as distinct. *"Men are told not to cry, not to talk about feelings, not to be weak. That damages people,"* said one girl in London. Others felt boys were trapped between outdated expectations of toughness and modern calls for emotional openness.

"I feel sorry for the boys," said a girl from Bristol. *"They're expected to keep everything in and just be strong all the time. That's not fair either."* She went on to say: *"Where my sympathy runs out is when we try to understand boys, but they give nothing back."*

This sense that girls are socialised to be emotionally literate while boys are left behind, was echoed across several schools. There was a reflective exchange in which one boy said: *"The girls always give each other presents on their birthdays. I can't remember the last time I bought a mate a present."*

One student summed up the dilemma: *"Boys either want to go back to the 'men should be strong providers' thing, or they want to move forward. There's no in-between."*

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE FOR MEN

What also emerged was a growing sense of tension between genders, particularly among boys who see changing gender dynamics as a threat. In Bristol, one boy observed, *"The rise in equality for women has made some boys feel more oppressed, because the gap's closing."* Others described how progress for women can be misread by some boys as a loss of male power or status.

In some cases, this has led to open resistance to concepts like feminism. A girl in Bristol noted, *"Some guys think feminism is anti-men, when it's really just trying to level the playing field."* Another student criticised what they saw as self-victimisation among men: *"They want to feel like victims because the system that benefitted them isn't working anymore."*

Yet there was also recognition that some of this tension stems from confusion more than malice. One student from Birmingham reflected, *"A lot of the time, when we talk about helping women, boys think it's an attack on them. It's not, but they don't see that."* It's not hostility, she implied, but defensiveness often driven by uncertainty about what masculinity means today.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES STOKE GENDER WARS

Running beneath these gender dynamics is the powerful influence of social media. Many students described how platforms like TikTok and Instagram don't just shape opinions, they deepen divisions. *"Algorithms feed you stuff that just confirms what you already think,"* said one student from London. *"Boys get all the grindset, masculinity content. Girls get beauty and self-care. No wonder we don't understand each other."*

Several boys spoke openly about the kind of content they encounter online like gym culture and self-improvement. At a college in Oldham, one student remarked that TikTok *"builds this idea that to be a man, you have to dominate".*

"Social media is like a magnifying glass," said a student from Redland Green. *"Small things get blown up and it starts to feel like a war between men and women, even when it isn't."*

Most students did not view this as a zero sum battle. Instead, they wanted space to talk and didn't think it was very productive to compete over which gender was the biggest victim. *"It's not about who has it harder,"* said one student. *"It's about understanding that the struggles are different."* That view was echoed by another pupil from a sixth form in Sunderland: *"We need to stop comparing pain and start listening to each other."*

WHAT DO BOYS THINK ABOUT SELF-IMPROVEMENT?

What was eye opening in the discussions in schools was the theme of self improvement. This is a theme that could be missed if we dismiss male influencers as misogynists and don't try to understand their message or why it is popular.

At a sixth form in London, boys spoke candidly about on-line self improvement culture. While some acknowledged the toxic and manipulative edge to this content, others saw value in it. *"There's definitely some things he [Tate] has said that look bad… but there's a lot of accounts that help you improve,"* one student said, pointing to inspirational quote pages and workout influencers as positive motivators.

There is a clear recognition that the line between motivation and manipulation can blur. *"I feel like it can be damaging when self-improvement goes too far. It's not improvement, it's damaging yourself,"* said another boy, highlighting the pressure to constantly strive to be better physically and mentally.

At a Sixth Form College in Bristol, one student argued that boys are being told to be more emotionally open, but some *"don't want to be a feminine person… they want to be strong, masculine".* That tension between embracing growth and resisting perceived softness reflected a deeper confusion about what it means to be a man today.

Many boys expressed a desire for authentic self-betterment rooted in resilience and discipline. *"Motivation is a small high,"* one student said. *"Discipline is a long-term commitment."* Others called for schools and society to teach this early, so young people are not left relying solely on viral videos for life guidance.

Boys were looking for self improvement that was genuine. Once again, they showed a sophistication, being able to get beneath the hype. They don't want to be sold stuff. They want help to become the best versions of themselves.

This reflects a wider generational shift in how young people, especially boys, are thinking about their bodies and self-worth. The pressure to be physically strong, mentally disciplined and emotionally contained is being amplified by social media in ways that previous generations did not experience. A 2023 Channel 4 report found that 62% of Gen Z girls feel pressure to be skinny, while 43% of boys feel pressure to be muscular or big. Nearly half (45%) of all respondents said their appearance is influenced by social media. Encouragingly, 44% also said that seeing body positive images helped them accept how they look (Channel 4, 2023).

THE IMPACT OF ON-LINE SEXUAL CONTENT

The scale of what teenage girls face on an almost daily basis is striking. There may be a perception, following the Me Too movement that sexual harassment was on the way out. But this was not the message of many of the girls we spoke to. In fact, the reverse, for some it had become normalised.

"Not a single one of the men I know have ever been sexually assaulted but every single girl I know, including myself, has been. That goes to show a lot."

"There's still so much sexism and misogyny and it is currently on the rise in schools, the public and workplaces."

The testimony of this girl from Sheffield is striking. The first is on the evasive nature of sexual content online - so called 'dick pics':

> *Social media has had a big impact, because I've had friends who I've known for years who I'm close with, who I have on social media and they ask for inappropriate photos over social media. You would never expect that from them and they would never ask you to do that in person.*
>
> *And I think with social media, they get overconfident. Like with Snapchat, one time I was added to a group chat and I accepted it because I know them and then the first snap I opened is not a snap that you ever would want to see. I wouldn't say it's a very common thing, but it's happened more times than you'd want it to happen.*
>
> *If you tell people, nobody cares, it's like, oh, yeah, well, whatever. And it's overlocked. It's utterly overlooked. They almost don't realise the impact that it has. And I don't mean I sit and dwell on it for hours, but if I get it, I'm just like what the hell. It's not nice to see and it is uncomfortable to see that, especially from someone that you'd almost consider, like your friend, someone that you've known. It makes you feel I don't ever want to see you again after you think that it's appropriate to send something like that and not think of the consequences, or even if they think that's appropriate.*
>
> *However many times the problem is raised, nothing really gets done about it. And If you say something when you receive an unsolicited message like that, you are the bad person for snitching. If you snitch on them, it's your fault for getting them in trouble and for speaking out about it. It always ends up on the victim.*

While there has been a huge amount of focus on young people's social media use, there has been too little attention given to the growing impact of easily accessible pornography.

A MISSING CONVERSATION ABOUT CONNECTION

Alongside the pressures of gender and identity, there's a quieter story unfolding: fewer young people are forming close relationships. Many students spoke about feeling isolated, unsure how to connect and increasingly turning to online content to fill that gap. *"People get what they need from their phones now,"* one student said. *"It's like dating without the risk."*

Some boys described never having been in a relationship at all, hinting at frustration or confusion about what intimacy looks like in today's world. This disconnect is fuelling spaces like the incel community, where resentment and loneliness can harden into anger.

It's not just about sex or dating. It's about a generation growing up surrounded by content about love and attraction, but with fewer tools to navigate those things in real life. One girl at a London school said: *"Everyone's pretending they don't care. But a lot of people are just lonely."*

In the context of schools and colleges it wasn't appropriate to go into a lot of detail about relationships though the national data is clear: young people are having fewer relationships and are having them later. We didn't explore this theme in depth, but it's one we recommend someone returns to, as understanding how young people form or fail to form relationships feels essential to any conversation about connection.

WE LOVE BRITAIN, IT'S JUST GOING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

Young people are not buying the story they are being sold. Again and again, we heard a version of the same feeling: this country could be something special, but right now, it is failing the people who need it most.

"I'm proud to be British," one student said, *"but I don't think Britain is proud of us."*

For many, there was real affection for British values like fairness, free speech and British institutions like the NHS. But that sat alongside a deep sense of unease about the cost of living crisis, political sleaze, broken promises and the feeling that this is a country where success depends too much on the luck of where you are born.

It did not feel to us as if this was a generation turning away from democracy but one that was increasingly sceptical of how it is currently being practised. There was a sense that politics had become too performative and that many politicians were more interested in superficial communications than in addressing the structural issues facing their communities. Rather than disengaged, these young people were reflective and realistic, hopeful that things could improve but unconvinced that those in power were willing or able to make that happen.

They want a democracy that actually feels responsive to their generation's challenges. They want their voices taken seriously, not patronised or dismissed.

This chapter is about understanding why young people feel democracy has drifted away from them, why some are attracted to seemingly decisive leaders like Donald Trump and most importantly, what needs to change if democracy is to regain their trust.

While young people remain committed to democratic values, their patience is not unlimited. If democracy continues to feel disconnected, ineffective and irrelevant, their patience (and belief) might just run out.

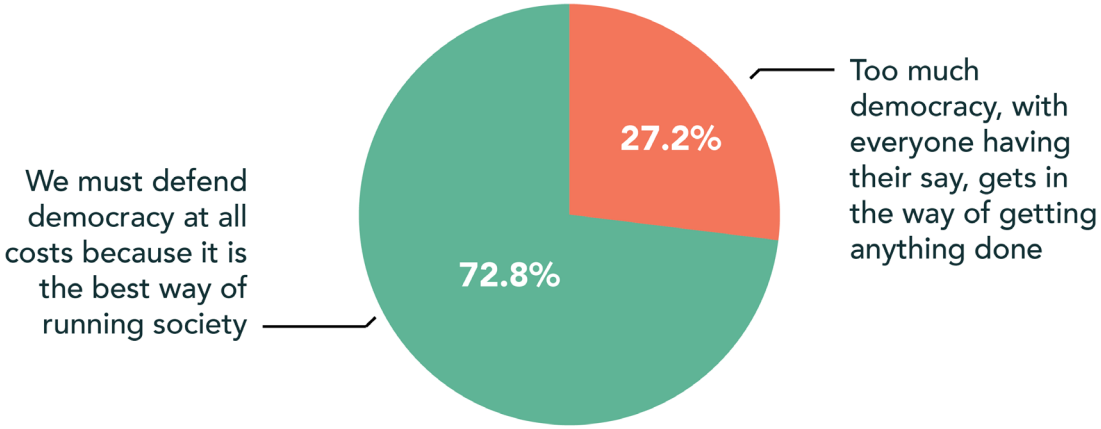
DISILLUSIONED, NOT ANTI-DEMOCRATIC

Despite their frustrations, the young people we spoke to were not anti-democratic. They were vocal in their support for democratic principles. Their dissatisfaction was directed toward democracy's current state in Britain, not toward democracy as a system.

FIGURE 2

Which of these statements do you most agree with?

504 responses



One student from Manchester put it clearly:

"We're tired of seeing partygate scandals and endless internal party arguments. We don't want an illiberal state. We just want a country that actually works."

They spoke clearly about feeling exhausted by constant crisis management and superficial political battles. As 16-18 year olds, government for them is having six prime ministers in nine years. From our conversations it became clear that what they want is not authoritarianism or less democracy, it is a democracy that delivers tangible improvements in their lives.

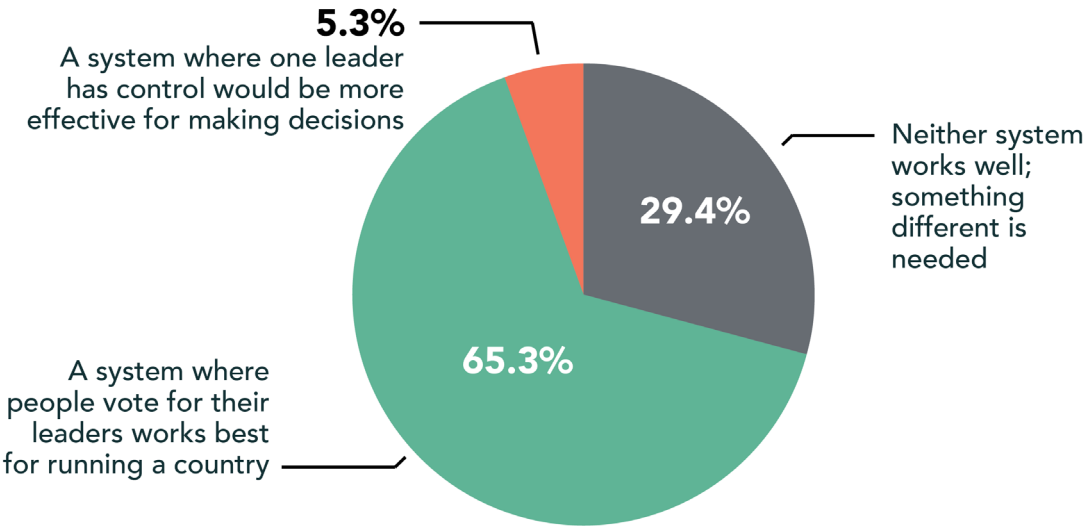
This wordle gives a flavour of the young people's answer to the question *how would you describe democracy in one word*. Overall most answers were favourable.

And when pushed to choose something more decisive and authoritarian, a big majority of students rejected this approach.

FIGURE 3

Which of these statements do you most agree with?

504 responses



WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE REALLY WANT FROM DEMOCRACY

When asked explicitly about the changes they would like to see, students articulated clear priorities for democratic reform. Crucially, these demands went beyond surface-level changes:

- **Accountability and Integrity:** Young people want politicians held genuinely accountable for mistakes. A student from Oldham stated plainly: *"If they break promises, there need to be real consequences."*
- **Genuine Responsiveness:** Rather than symbolic gestures, students wanted practical improvements in areas like housing affordability, education and climate change. *"Stop arguing about Brexit and sort out affordable housing,"* said one from Uxbridge.
- **Political Stability and Focus:** They wanted an end to constant infighting and scandal. *"Headlines shouldn't always be about political drama,"* said a student from Bristol. *"They should be about fixing the country."*

Young people's vision for democracy was fundamentally practical, realistic and achievable. They are not expecting a utopia.

IS POLITICS BECOMING IRRELEVANT?

When discussing politicians, students did not mince words: *"Politicians are dishonest,"* said one from Wigan. Another student from Sunderland echoed a common theme:

"Politicians talk all day, but change nothing. I've seen three prime ministers in a year and none of them seemed to care about what we care about."

Many students felt detached. They see endless cycles of promises and disappointments, leading to profound disillusionment.

"Politics feels more like a circus. Politicians are too busy arguing and calling each other corrupt to fix anything that matters." (Bristol)

Young people's lack of trust in politics is genuinely concerning but not surprising. If politicians themselves constantly accuse each other of corruption, incompetence and dishonesty, young people notice. Scandals, whether partygate, expenses or endless infighting, dominate their view of politics. This is the political reality this generation has grown up with and it is creating a deep-rooted scepticism. They are a generation too young, for example, to have witnessed the huge success of the 2012 London Olympics.

Again, we asked them to describe politics in one word. Compared with their views on democracy, the answers were damming with only a few exceptions.

KNIFE CRIME - A SYMBOL OF POLITICIANS' FAILURE TO LISTEN

Knife crime came up in nearly every session we ran. Often unprompted. Young people did not just see knife crime as a political issue or something they'd read about online, it was personal. It was close. In some cases, it was routine. Politicians' failure to act on it, is a symbol for young people that they don't care or if they do care they don't deliver.

In one group in Uxbridge, participants were asked to name the worst things about Britain today. Their answers: homelessness, the cost of living and knife crime. In another, a student from Bristol pointed to violence and gangs as one of the core challenges young men face: *"Boys being more likely to join gangs and get involved in knife crime."*

We expected politics to come up. We expected identity, class and culture wars. But maybe naively, we didn't expect how often young people told us they simply didn't feel safe. And this was not limited to one region or one background. From Bristol to Oldham to Sunderland, young people talked about carrying a sense of anxiety of looking over their shoulder on the way home, of knowing which streets to avoid, of having fewer and fewer places to go where they could relax without worry.

The numbers back this up. In an open-ended question in our national survey of 16–18-year-olds, knife crime and mental health were the top concerns. Nearly one in five said that *"feeling safer"* or *"reducing violence"* was what would most improve their lives locally.

But the story doesn't stop at fear. Because when we dug deeper, it became clear that knife crime and the fear surrounding it was often a symptom of something broader: the collapse of third spaces. When asked what would help, young people didn't just say more police. They talked about youth clubs that had shut down, libraries that no longer felt welcoming, parks that felt unsafe after dark and leisure spaces that were unaffordable. One student put it: "*We can't complain that young people are always online if there's nothing for them to do offline.*"

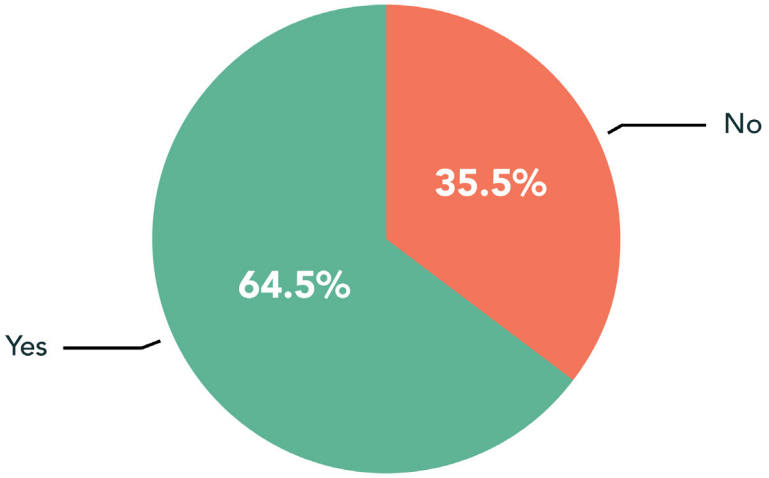
We are quick to criticise young people for being glued to their phones, for living in algorithmic bubbles or idolising influencers but we have systematically removed the spaces where they once built friendships, learned trust and figured themselves out. If you take away the youth club and the sports hall and the community centre, you shouldn't be surprised when the on-line world from the safety of your bedroom becomes the default option.

Knife crime is part of a deeper social pattern. It's not just about weapons or gangs. It's about what happens when public spaces shrink and young people are left to navigate their world without guidance, protection or belonging. The solution won't come from tougher sentencing alone. It will come from rebuilding trust and that means rebuilding space. Offline, open and safe.

PROUD OF BRITAIN, BUT FRUSTRATED BY ITS DIRECTION

Contrary to prevailing narratives, we found that a substantial majority, 64.5% of young people we surveyed said they were proud to be British. This figure surprised us, challenging assumptions that younger generations are increasingly alienated or indifferent about national identity.

FIGURE 4
Are you proud to be British?
504 responses



For many, pride in Britain was compromised by specific frustrations about its current trajectory. One student in Bristol articulated a common concern:

"I am proud to be British, but it's becoming harder. The rise of the far right worries me. I feel like we're moving backwards on things like climate change and equality."

Interestingly, what also emerged was the breadth of viewpoints among young people. While some expressed concerns about the rise in far-right sentiment and insufficient action on climate change, others had starkly different reasons for their discontent:

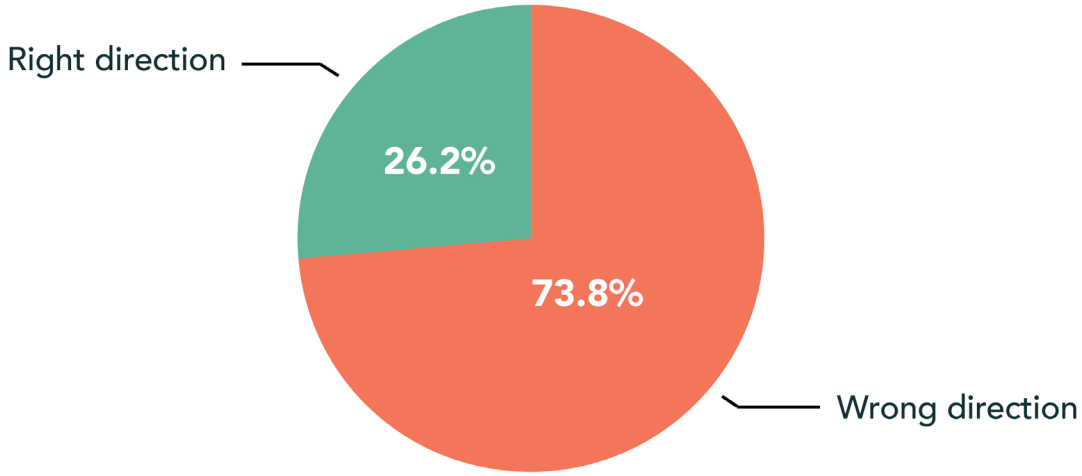
"The woke culture just goes too far. We're losing sight of what Britain used to stand for."

These divergent views remind us that young people are politically diverse and reflect deeper divisions within society. Despite their differences, there was broad agreement that the current direction of the country is troubling and unsatisfactory. A big majority think Britain is going in the wrong direction.

FIGURE 5

Do you think Britain is going in the right or wrong direction?

504 responses



THE STRONG LEADER

One of the most revealing themes to emerge from our survey and listening sessions was how deeply the idea of "*strength*" resonates with young people. It wasn't strength defined by moral authority or progressive vision. It was something simpler and perhaps more dangerous: visible control. A sense that a leader knows what they believe, speaks clearly and acts quickly. In a political landscape often defined by dithering, U-turns and spin, this kind of clarity is magnetic.

What surprised us most was the way students spoke about figures like Donald Trump and Nigel Farage. They came up repeatedly in conversations, not always with approval but often with a kind of reluctant respect. It was not necessarily about liking them or agreeing with their views. It was that they seemed confident, unapologetic and clear in what they stood for. For many young people, especially in contrast to more conventional politicians, they gave the impression of being in control.

A student in Oldham explained it plainly:

"Trump says things and then does them. Or at least it looks that way. Politicians here just argue."

Across the country we heard strikingly similar views. Donald Trump was frequently described as bold, unapologetic and *"not afraid to make enemies."* Nigel Farage, meanwhile, was seen by many as one of the few UK politicians who *"says what he actually thinks."*

When asked who they support (out of Labour, Tories, Reform and Lib Dems leaders - this was before the Green resurgence) - and not given the option of saying none of the above - many went for Keir Starmer, but they acknowledged they knew very little about him.

Many of those who picked Farage did so not because they agreed with his views, but because they felt he was consistent and direct. A student from Sunderland said:

"Even if I don't agree with him, at least he says what he means. You don't get that with most politicians."

A student from Oldham offered a similar perspective:

"He's not likeable, but he's not fake. That counts for something."

Farage's appeal was not necessarily about political alignment. In a field of politicians who students often struggled to describe or differentiate, Farage stood out. They could tell you what he thought, they could tell you what he said.

"Farage is the only one who sounds like he actually believes what he's saying," a student from Sunderland told us. "Everyone else sounds like they've been told what to say by some committee."

Others were more critical, but still acknowledged his appeal. One student in Wigan said:

"He's not likeable, but you know where he stands. That matters."

Traditional politicians are increasingly seen as indistinguishable from one another. Polished, vague and risk-averse, figures like Trump and Farage, are not. Young people know that this is a performance. Several students admitted they did not trust Trump or Farage but still admired the way they communicated.

"It's not about facts. It's about energy," one student in Uxbridge said. *"Trump and Farage come off like they actually want to fix stuff."*

The appeal of these figures is not necessarily a rejection of democratic values. It is a reaction to how democracy is currently functioning. After years of political chaos, party scandals and economic stagnation, many young people have grown sceptical that traditional processes can deliver change at all. Figures who project strength, even if it's just a carefully maintained image, are filling the leadership vacuum left by cautious centrism and institutional paralysis.

This is not the same as support for authoritarianism, students were clear eyed about the risks. But the attraction to *"strength"* reflects a hunger for conviction. A longing for action in a political climate dominated by hesitation.

What makes this even more striking is how early this scepticism takes root. Many of the young people we spoke to have not even voted yet and already, a significant proportion are convinced that British politics is broken.

The danger is not that this generation has given up on democracy. It's that if nothing changes, they might stop believing democracy can work for them at all.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

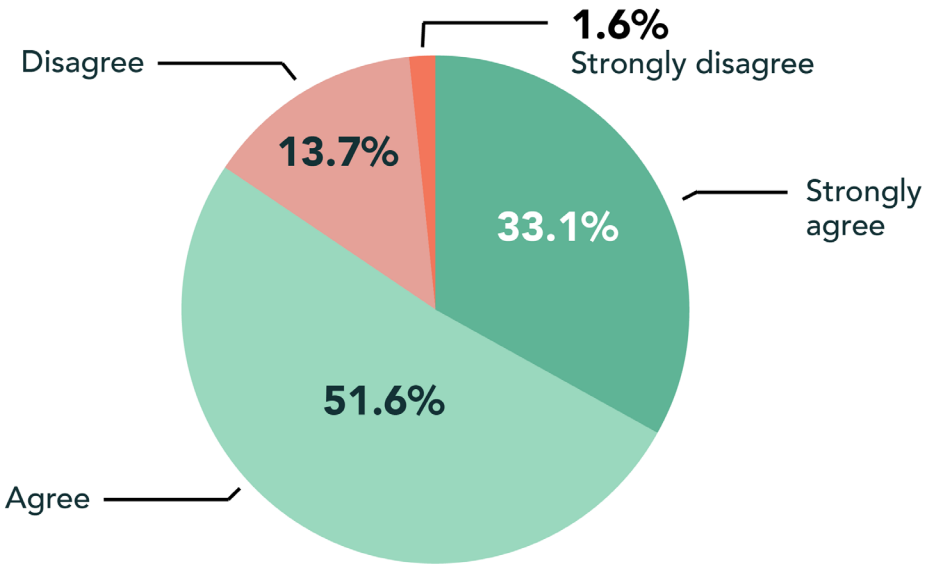
Young people are worried about the future, but many still believe they will have a better life than their parents. When asked directly if they thought they would have better opportunities than their parents, 84% agreed or agreed strongly. Data that goes directly against the pessimism that most feel this generation has.

These numbers may be explained in part, because schools and colleges are places of optimism, where teachers are supporting young people to take the next steps and offering a set of possibilities and pathways. When out in the 'real world', having to navigate the jobs market or affordable housing, then some of that optimism can start to dissipate.

FIGURE 5

I believe I will have better opportunities than my parents had.

504 responses



In a girls' only sixth form in Birmingham, one student reflected that while her parents never went to university, she felt she had the opportunity to pursue higher education and carve out a career. There was realism alongside optimism, with concerns about AI replacing jobs and a sense that personal ambition must be grounded in yearly *"checkpoints"* to keep goals attainable.

For some, like those from a sixth form college in Bristol, hope comes with demands for more systemic reform. Students there described themselves using archetypes like *"the activist"* or *"the entrepreneur,"* and many wrestled with how to maintain optimism while distrusting mainstream politics. Several said that while they may not believe in today's parties or political leaders, they still believe in the possibility of a better system, one they hope to help shape.

As one put it, *"If you think too far forward, you might get ahead of yourself. You should look at certain checkpoints to meet in the future."*

The question of whether this generation has more opportunity than the last remains complicated. A student from a sixth form in Sunderland said, *"I think if you work hard enough, you probably can [do better than your parents]. You just need a bit more motivation and encouragement."* But others were quick to point out the systemic factors at play. *"If you have more money, you have more opportunities… the family you're born into partly determines how well you do,"* noted another student from the same school.

In Uxbridge, one student captured the intersection of class and identity more starkly: *"Class matters more… when you move up a class, your new identity becomes your class, rather than being the working-class Black man that you were."*

At the heart of their frustration is a sense that education is not preparing them for the real challenges of adulthood. Students at girls only sixth form in Birmingham were clear eyed: *"School teaches people how to get qualifications rather than how they should act. I think it's more important to be a good person and be respectful."* Another added, *"It doesn't teach you about life, buying a house, getting insurance, investing… you don't learn those things."*

Across the board, these reflections reveal a generation grappling with hope, realism and rising awareness. Their words point not to apathy, but to a yearning for systems: in education, politics and technology, that match the complexity and potential of their lives.

AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE

1. Economic Fairness and Cost of Living

Frustration with the economy was front and centre for many young respondents, reflecting a deep concern about affordability and financial insecurity. *"Cost of living,"* one participant wrote bluntly, echoed by others who cited *"poverty"* and *"inflation, gas prices, strikes"* as urgent issues shaping their lives. Calls for action were specific: *"More pay if houses are becoming more expensive"* and a *"cheaper cost of living."* The dominant feeling was that the economic system unfairly burdens working people. One succinct response captured this mood: *"Tax wealth not work."*

2. Social Inequality and Discrimination

Across the board, young people voiced a strong desire to see society become fairer and more inclusive. Their responses called for *"equality in wealth, class, education,"* and demanded *"no discrimination."* Several talked about *"Discrimination and rise of the far right and the huge issue of poverty."* Others named specific forces of division *"racism"* and *"sexism"* as barriers to the kind of society they want to live in.

3. Political Distrust and Desire for Reform

Deep disillusionment with politics was another dominant theme. Responses reflected a lack of faith in leadership, summed up in the stark phrase: *"The government being poor."* There was a call for leaders who act rather than stall: *"More decisive politicians."* Many young people also demanded structural change: *"Change the voting system,"* one said, highlighting a growing awareness of systemic barriers to representation. Others called for a focus on: *"Better public services and healthcare,"* and a *"reform of the NHS,".*

4. Safety and knife crime

Knife crime was a big issue across many of the schools we went to. Policy to help prevent knife crime would be enough to make some students go out and vote for a party. Some say knife crime is the most important change they would like to see. At a sixth form in Bristol, one student directly linked male exclusion and social alienation to issues like joining gangs and becoming involved in knife crime.

5. Culture, Identity and Attitudes

Underlying many of these frustrations was a desire to shift the national mindset. *"The people's attitude and behaviour"* was cited as a core problem, pointing to a breakdown in civic trust and cohesion. Some called for more empathy: *"Make people more tolerant."* Others expressed weariness with the polarisation of public discourse: *"Too much identity politics."* A few captured this mood with just one word: *"Ignorance."* Another added, *"Closed mindedness."* For these young voices, the problem is not just policy - it's the cultural climate, and a collective failure to engage openly, respectfully and thoughtfully with difference.

WHAT KIND OF ROLE MODELS DO THEY WANT?

We asked young people what would make the ideal role model.

Their views were a long way from what influencers are often offering which shows that young people have remained discerning and that content creators are missing a trick in not providing more rounded role models.

We gathered a group of students in Sheffield to reflect on what makes someone a good role model and their responses offer a revealing snapshot of a generation that values honesty, competence and moral clarity more than status or fame.

For many, a role model is fundamentally *"someone you look up to,"* as one student put it, *"someone you aspire to be… a target for yourself."* But admiration alone isn't enough.

A recurring theme was expertise. A role model, they agreed, must be an *"expert in their field,"* someone with real knowledge and skill - whether that's in science, sport, or entrepreneurship. *"If you were inspired by a mathematician who can't do maths,"* one student pointed out, *"that would be a failing."* Another added: *"Whether it be sports or maths, you want to be inspired by someone who knows what they're doing."*

Moral values were also vital to these students. Students wanted role models who had a clear sense of right and wrong, people who own up to mistakes and avoid spin. *"If you've screwed up,"* one student said, *"say you've screwed up. Don't avoid the question or try to talk your way out of it."* They emphasised that dependability and honesty are central: leadership is not about perfection, but accountability.

Charisma was not dismissed but put into perspective. Students were quick to distinguish between flashy charm and genuine communicative power. *"Charisma is about being clear and relatable,"* said one participant. *"If somebody starts talking about complex economics, I won't*

understand them. But if they're clear and simple, I'll want to listen." Another agreed, *"Even if it makes you look bad, just answer the question flat out."*

Interestingly, the group explored how clarity and confidence can become dangerous when they mask shallow or harmful ideas. *"Populists like Trump or Farage,"* one student argued, *"win support by saying simple things people understand, but the policies might not work. They get elected, then do badly."* The group agreed this dynamic is worsened by a lack of political education. *"We're taught to read and write from a young age. So why not economics and taxes? Why not politics?"* one asked.

The conversation turned to specific figures. Sports legends like Muhammad Ali and LeBron James were cited as strong role models: *"good people who were also good at what they did."* Family members, too, were praised, such as an aunt who *"built the life she wanted"* and became an inspiration. Elon Musk drew mixed views. While some admired his ambition and vision, others were critical: *"He's good at taking credit for other people's work… he hires geniuses and puts on the persona of a genius."*

Their critiques extended beyond individuals. *"The problem in politics,"* one student said, *"is that people vote for someone because they like the way they talk or look not because of the policies."* Another concluded, *"Politics has always been a game about who can sell themselves best not who has the best ideas."*

In one workshop, there was an amusing moment when we asked students whether they personally thought policies or personality mattered most when judging a political leader. The vast majority put their hands up for policies. Then we asked them what they thought most voters believed, and the vast majority put their hands up for personality.

The final vision of a role model that emerged was strikingly holistic. It's someone who is inspiring, but also credible. Someone who is honest, accountable, clear and grounded. Someone who *"makes you want to be better,"* as one student put it not just in their field, but as a person.

In an age dominated by algorithms, influencers and fast-talking populists, students want more and they're thinking hard about what it takes to become someone worth looking up to.

SUMMARY: THE IDEAL ROLE MODEL

A good role model, according to a group of students, is:

- **Inspiring** (motivates you to grow)
- **Expert** (knows their field)
- **Ethical** (knows right from wrong)
- **Charismatic and Clear (**engaging without being manipulative)
- **Authentic** (honest, transparent, accountable)
- **Relatable and Independent** (real, grounded, self-directed)

MORE REAL EXPERIENCES

Another striking trend started emerging from our conversations. One that we believe will grow in the coming years. Young people are looking to get off social media and do something more real. They are craving experiences that bring them closer to nature, create better relationships, even develop a greater spirituality.

One girl said: *"This is the first time I have admitted to a wider group that I don't have a mobile phone and I'm proud of that."*

Another described wanting more meaning in her life. To have a purpose that went beyond the on-line world.

It is clear that with help and guidance, there is a deeper, richer set of experiences that young people desire.

It will not mean no on-line life, but that life will be in better balance.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF COMMUNICATING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE - ACCORDING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

We asked young people what is wrong with the way politicians communicate with young people and what they should do differently

1. BE AUTHENTIC, NOT OVERLY SCRIPTED

Young people gravitate to personalities. Authentic voices that have a take on the world. They resist the 'on message' scripted politician reading out the line to take, dancing around the issues, hiding from the difficult questions and failing to make an emotional connection.

The young people we spoke to say:

- *"They just say what they think we want to hear. Not what they actually believe."*
- *"It always feels like they're performing, not talking to us."*
- *"You can tell they've rehearsed everything. There's no real emotion, no truth."*
- *"They use so many words and say absolutely nothing."*
- *"It doesn't feel like they actually care about young people… It would be beneficial if they were more personable and more honest."*
- *"They don't often do what they say, they lie and that's how that stigma is brought about."*
- *"They should be more honest with policies to the people and not sugarcoat over their actual intentions."*

2. DON'T BE NEGATIVE THE WHOLE TIME

Young people like the rest of the population want a message of hope, to be able to see a brighter future.

- *"All they do is bash the other side. What are they actually for?"*
- *"Politics feels like a never-ending fight, not a place for solutions."*
- *"It's always blame, fear, outrage, nothing uplifting."*
- *"They're always tearing people down, never building anything up."*
- *"They argue."*
- *"Too petty, too adversarial, attack each other too much, which limits cooperation significantly."*
- *"They insult the opposition without providing any of their own policies."*

3. BE REAL AND CONNECTED AND CUT THE JARGON

Politician speak goes down like a bag of sick. Young people want plain speaking and honest engagement

- *"They talk like they've never had to pay rent or take a bus to work."*
- *"You can tell they've never sat in a classroom like ours or worried about paying for lunch."*
- *"They throw stats at us but don't get the reality."*
- *"They don't get it. They talk about issues like they've never lived them."*
- *"They appear out of touch... trying to relate to the younger population doesn't seem genuine."*
- *"Too out of touch, don't take time to connect personally and overcomplicate issues."*
- *"They view it from their personal experiences rather than that of a wider society."*
- *"Be more genuine, put things simply so that we actually understand what they're trying to do."*
- *"Make it sound more simple."*
- *"They try to be relatable online, but it's painful to watch."*
- *"Stop posting memes. Start posting meaning."*
- *"We don't need you to go viral -we need you to be honest."*
- *"Just be real. We can tell when you're faking it."*
- *"Using social media presents them as funny and likeable when their views are not."*
- *"Make Keir Starmer do an Instagram Live."*

4. GIVE US SOME VISION AND SOME IDEAS

People want policies and ideas that they can engage with. They want a sense of direction, a sense of what it's all for.

- *"They talk about policies but not purpose."*
- *"I want to hear about the kind of future they believe in, not just what they'll cut or fund."*
- *"It's like they're managing a system, not leading a movement."*
- *"They tell us what they'll do, but not why it matters or what kind of world they want to build."*
- *"Too formal and boring, doesn't engage with some people."*
- *"They are boring."*
- *"Boring."*

WHY DISCUSSION HAS BEEN CANCELLED IN SCHOOLS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Schools are closing down space for debate and discussion. Our research suggests that this problem is serious and needs to be rectified.

One teacher explained what usually happens in schools: the teachers with a bit of slack on their timetable often have it filled up with some citizenship or PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) lessons. They are often not trained to have in-depth conversations and steer clear of them. Teachers in other lessons - history, physics, English - are mostly just trying to get through the subject content.

Form time, tutor time or registration time in schools is usually 15 or 20 mins and therefore too short for proper discussions.

Added to this, there are many teachers, who, convinced by the 'boys are being corrupted by Andrew Tate' narrative and being unaware about what is really going on on-line, live in fear of the unknown.

The obligatory, 'Andrew Tate is a bad person' assembly with a homily from a senior leader is the preferred method of covering this topic. Students find this lame. *"We've had the Andrew Tate assembly,"* one said in a contemptuous tone.

As a consequence boys who try to air their feelings get closed down. It is a safety first approach from schools that means boys are not exposed to the counter arguments from girls (and other boys) and instead are forced to retreat back on-line to their own echo chambers.

As we went around the country speaking to 16-18 year olds, it became instructive to watch the teachers observing our workshops.

For some, it was totally eye-opening. *"We never hear them discuss these things". "I never knew she had been exposed to that." "I've never heard him articulate those views."* For others it was a wake up call to follow up with further sessions: *"We need to counter that misconception." "Those students need educating!"*

We also noticed after the workshops, the teachers would gather around and praise the students who had been 'on message' - who had in their view given the more acceptable answers. Those who had strayed into more dangerous territory were not given similar treatment. Those cues are picked up by the students.

There are reasons for this. Some reflect the pressures put on schools. A national study of 467 teachers found that 40% said they had no time to explore masculinity with boys and only 33% had recently held any classroom dialogue on it, showing that these conversations too often are not happening (Boys' Impact / Blower & Rainford, 2025). In practice, many schools default to assemblies rather than taught discussion: 62% of secondaries report *"taking action"* on influencers like Andrew Tate, usually through assemblies, while teachers' concerns remains extremely high - 91% of teachers (Teacher Tapp, 2025). Teachers also report rising misogynistic incidents and a tendency to avoid contentious topics under pressure, whether from impartiality rules or inspection anxiety.

In recent years, there has been a laudable attempt to protect girls in school from sexualised or harassing behavior. The result, because of the compliance culture and the fear of Ofsted inspectors, is that teachers are shutting down conversations that might get too controversial. For many teachers, particularly young teachers, there is an urgent need for training in sensitive facilitation and this rarely happens. While we know some students may not want to talk openly at school, we also know that for some it can be a vital space to air something that is causing anxiety.

It is time we took this seriously. If school is not the place where young people can debate and discuss the most controversial and difficult issues, what is it for?

School is the one hope we have left of a less polarised world in which there is deeper understanding of complex issues and emotions. Government needs to make sure it does not make compliance so oppressive or the exam pressure so overwhelming, that no time and space is left for every child to find out who they are and what they believe - and to have robust debates about the complex world in which they live.

CONCLUSION

Sixteen to eighteen year olds are not the caricatures you meet in headlines. When you talk to them - and more importantly listen to them - a different picture emerges. They are sophisticated, sharp, idealistic, and suspicious of hype.

The two of us - different ages, different backgrounds, different perspectives - listened to more than 700 of them across the country. We went in with an open mind but with one over-riding instinct - a distaste for the moral panic of an older generation towards young people.

We quickly found that the picture of young people painted in the media, and screeching out from the 'polling evidence' didn't begin to tell the real story.

The received wisdom says this is a generation captured by Andrew Tate and lost to the algorithm. Wrong. Their media worlds are busy and fragmented. Entertainers, streamers, adult-content creators, news explainers, rightwing thinkers and leftwing voices all jostle for space, often on the same feed, often just a swipe away. Young people know TikTok gives them the headline not the depth, and many cross-check elsewhere.

The headlines suggest they had given up on democracy. Wrong again. They are disillusioned with how it's practised, not with the idea. They want competence over performance and consequence over spin. If traditional politics cannot deliver visible wins on the things they keep naming; safety, housing and the cost of living, others will surely fill the gap.

We are told young men are the villains and the victims. The reality is untidier. Boys are navigating a minefield of messages about masculinity, be tough but not aggressive, open but not weak. At the same time girls still face structural barriers and the daily grind of harassment. Our students resisted the zero-sum game. They asked for space to say two things at once: women still have it hard and boys need support. They did not see it as fence-sitting, they saw it as a moral obligation.

We are told Gen Z is one thing. It is clearly not. Given the pace of change, do we really expect a 16-year-old and a 28-year-old to have the same outlook? So we built a set of student-co-created profiles, a way of talking about differences without flattening people into stereotypes. Most young people saw themselves as a mix and a large majority found the framework at least somewhat accurate as a starting point for better conversations. The point is not to label. It is to listen with more nuance.

We found, worryingly, that schools are struggling to facilitate difficult debates. It's seen as too tricky and too political. Teachers are concerned for safeguarding risks, but that means they are avoiding urgent conversations. Some believe their role is to be censorious - judgemental of the 'wrong' points of view. But that often prevents deep listening. Yet, when adults step back and let students speak, something vital happens. Views surface that are usually hidden. Misconceptions can be challenged in the open, not chased online. We are not asking schools and teachers to pick sides. We are suggesting that schools foster critical thinking and support respectable debate.

We were told young people are cynical to the core. They are not. They are proud of Britain but worried about its direction. They feel unsafe in places where they live and they keep asking a simple question adults should take personally: if we shut down third spaces, if knife crime makes going out dangerous, why are we surprised when the bedroom and the "For You" page become the default?

So what now?

For schools: make time and create structure. Facilitate discussions, don't just deliver sermons. Split by topic or gender when needed, then bring groups back together to test ideas in a safe space before they harden online. Replace "performative assemblies" with planned, repeated dialogue.

For policymakers: stop diagnosing from columns and start talking to young people meaningfully and don't make the mistake of just speaking to the young people that seek to speak to you. Fund spaces for young people to meet. Young people have a real yearning to do more in person. Back evidence-led prevention on violence and misogyny that treats boys as accountable agents and girls with respect. Show that young people - not just the elderly - count when making policy. Knife crime matters and mental health are particularly important.

For communicators: talk like a person. Say what you believe. Cut the jargon. Do what you say you are going to do. Be authentic and respectful. Never pander or patronise.

For parents and mentors: model the habits we want schools to teach: curiosity, disagreement without contempt or cancelling, build healthy relationships. The internet isn't going away. Neither is your influence.

The harassment too many girls face needs to be taken far more seriously. And, there also needs to be far greater support for boys as they make the confusing, complex, and perilous journey to becoming a man.

Policymakers, politicians and parents might find it useful to think of online content in three overlapping categories – the 3Hs. Healthy content entertains, teaches or connects, supporting long-term wellbeing. Hyper content looks positive – about fitness, self-improvement or discipline – but can slip into hustle culture, emotional suppression or obsession, reflecting young people's search for meaning yet risking burnout or isolation. Harmful content spreads misogynistic or anti-feminist "red pill" narratives, conspiracies and blame, often exploiting alienation and tipping into radicalisation. This is not about the crude labelling of content, which would be impossible to do, but about using this lens to understand it, to expose what is most harmful, and to equip young people with the tools to thrive in healthier ways.

Finally, we thought we would give our view on one of the most contentious public policy issues of the moment - the regulation of social media. Both of us went into these workshops sceptical about a ban. And we remain sceptical about banning phones in schools - only because schools already have perfectly good behaviour codes for mobile phones, and because most trouble with social media and phones happens after school not during school. But we have come around to the belief that social media should be banned for the under 16s. We believe that will go a long way to releasing young people from the grip of addiction. It is what many of them want and we have a duty to support them in doing so.

The lesson of this project is simple: when you really listen, the story changes. If we want better outcomes, we need to meet young people where they are online and offline with honesty, structure and respect.

Sixteen-year-olds are about to enter the electorate. We can either talk at them, or work with them to build a lasting and meaningful dialogue. We can cancel debate and let the feed decide, or we can rebuild rooms where disagreement is a skill not a scandal. This report is an invitation

to choose the second path to move past panic, past easy narratives and to do the patient work that helps young people become the citizens they're already trying to be.

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