

**WHAT DO
YOU NEED
TO**
#MAKEITGOOD?

Insight Topic 17: **SOCIAL MEDIA**

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INTRODUCTION

NHS Tayside and partners want to adopt a positive approach to young people's sexual health. An insight gathering project has engaged young people in discussion of what they need to make relationships good. The purpose of the insight process is to bring detail to consideration of future services, particularly the possible use of social marketing or broader communication messages targeting young people.

This paper is one of a number of topic chapters published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org Each topic chapter presents:

- Insight from young people.
- Insight from other research, resources or services.
- A summary and discussion points.

For more about the insight gathering process please refer to **'About the Insight Gathering project'** also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org

1. INSIGHT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

In the initial focus groups, the topic of **SOCIAL MEDIA** was raised and discussed by 11 of the 16 groups. In terms of online engagement, responses to the **SOCIAL MEDIA** online survey came from 65 young people as follows:

Online engagement by Local Authority:

	Number of online submissions
Angus	15
Dundee	44
Perth and Kinross	5
Other area	1
Total by method	65

Online engagement by gender:

	Male	Female	Other gender identity
Number of participants	22	41	2

Online engagement by age:

	Under 16	16	17	18	19	20	21+
Number of participants	11	28	17	2	3	2	2

In addition to discussion in focus groups, young people completing the **SOCIAL MEDIA** survey provided a response to the request: *Tell us about your experience of social media when it comes to sex or relationships*. Insight from young people points to several themes.

Positive views and the use of social media

Via online contributions and focus group discussion young people have identified positive aspects of their use of social media, with a focus on the connections it provides with others and the ways it facilitates access to ideas and opinions. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of social media when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

World's greatest invention. (16/Dundee/Male)

Way for people to share experiences and voice their opinion.
(17/Dundee/Female)

My experience of social media is alright when it comes to sex and relationships.
(>16/Angus/Female)

It is a way to communicate with friends and family and see what is going on in the world and things that matter to you. (16/Angus/Male)

It means that you can stay in contact. (16/Dundee/Male)

I wouldn't have had any of the relationships I've had if it wasn't for Facebook. (Focus Group 1/Angus)

Its good if you want to know if someone is single or not. (Focus Group 14/P&K)

I think it helps – when you use it privately. (Focus Group 15/Angus)

Negative aspects of social media

Young people have also identified negative aspects of using social media, this includes online bullying, exposure to unwanted views or images (which might be a negative influence or pressurise young people), a lack of control of personal information or activities, and social media as a vector for rumours and for damaging reputations.

It can be a good thing and a bad thing because people can be bullied on social media. (17/Dundee/Female)

Potentially useful tool for self-expression, however there are far too many people online who would be prepared to pounce upon somebody's feelings and exploit them for malevolent purposes. (17/Dundee/Male)

Social media can be really pressurising to young people as they see stuff on the internet then they want to copy it without knowing the consequences. (16/Angus/Female)

Most have my relationships have started because I have been speaking over face book, I think this is bad but I'm trying to change that now. I think it's bad because I had a bad experience with this in the past where boys came to a party and things happened. They had been invited over FB and I did not know them to talk to. (>16/Dundee/Female)

Social media is just a breeding ground for rumour and there's nothing you can do about it cos it's like a no win situation. If you respond to it people take it the wrong way and think you are just being a bitch or something, if you don't respond to it people think it's real and then you get lumped with some kind of false reputation! (Focus Group 8/P&K)

Social media and relationships

Young people identify social media platforms as the space where relationships become public.

People check people out. Relationships aren't 'official' until they're on Facebook. (Focus Group 14/P&K)

Has to be Facebook official or it's not real. (19/Dundee/Female)

However social media also provides a setting for what young people describe as 'drama' and in particular the escalation of difficulties or conflict between people.

Fucks you up, lots of drama. (17/Dundee/Other gender identity)

It's a drama – people stirring things up. (Focus Group 16/Angus)

As soon as anything like Facebook or that is involved it's just bad. People just spread rumours and make out that stuff has happened when it hasn't. It's all it's used for these days. In my opinion it shouldn't be around. (Focus Group 4/P&K)

YP 1: Yeah, that's a big influence. It's the fall-outs, airing all your dirty laundry.

YP 2: Other people provoke stuff.

YP 3: Some people don't have boundaries. (Focus Group 12/Dundee)

Young people also report that social media feeds into feelings of insecurity and jealousy. The theme of JEALOUSY is explored in more detail in another insight chapter published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org

Can make people jealous. See boyfriend liking or speaking to other girls. Makes people antisocial, lack of real communication. (17/Dundee/Female)

I'd say social media is harmful to most relationships, it does nothing but add to the idea that your girlfriend might be cheating on you. It's like somewhere else to go that you don't know what she is up to. I guess I am particularly untrusting, but I always have that suspicion and Facebook doesn't help. (Focus Group 5/P&K)

For some young people the negative impact of social media on personal relationships outweighs benefits.

Social Media is what kills relationships. The reason that our parents and grandparent's relationships are stronger is because the boy can't like another girls Instagram photo. (16/Dundee/Female)

This topic about social media is a strong subject for myself. Personally I don't like social media when it comes to relationships as too many people get involved and that's where rumors start and all kinds of problems are caused. (20/P&K/Male)

Social media and sharing sexual images

In terms of responses to the prompt *tell us about your experience of social media when it comes to sex or relationships* young people have also highlighted the taking

and sharing of sexual images. The practice of 'sexting' is linked by some to the influence of pornography. Responding to the prompt *tell us about your experience of social media when it comes to sex or relationships* young people said:

Sending sexual images to each other (>16/Dundee/Female)

nudes sexting porn (16/Dundee/Female)

It's the same as normal relationships, but can cause bother with pictures and videos. (18/Dundee/Female)

Well you get things like Facebook and Snapchat and you can take it up a notch and send sads (sads are dirtys) which then again is childporn erm yeah so... you get relationship statuses or whatever but that all I know. (16/Dundee/Female)

People often send nudes using social media which I disagree with and find disgusting. (16/Dundee/Female)

Porn is everywhere, people sharing pics. (18/P&K/Male)

Advice on using social media

Young people have shared insight on how to manage and use social media; these young people suggest limiting what is shared, placing greater emphasis on building face-to-face relationships and being cautious about what is shared when you are in a relationship for fear of images being misunderstood.

Leave it off of social media, no one cares and its overexposing yourself. Especially if your partner is uncomfortable about anyone else seeing/reading it. (19/Dundee/Female)

Just people seeing photos of you with other people, they make so many assumptions, photos really aren't that true. Like you never really know what's actually happening in the picture – like what's going on around. I think if you are in a relationship you need to stay away from Facebook! (Focus Group 6/Dundee)

Digital communication makes it easier to keep up to date with people, but you need to be with people to really make that connection. I'd expect sex to be something that we both agree on and want to make the connection and further our relationship. (Focus Group 2/Angus)

I've deleted my Facebook account cos it's just not worth the hassle. It's difficult cos people just put like really glamorous shit on there that probably didn't even happen, but looking at it just makes you feel bad and like what you are doing is never that good. Better just not to look at it. (Focus Group 8/P&K)

Do not put it on Facebook! Everyone has something to say – they see who you're with and bring up their past. (Focus Group 13/Dundee)

2. INSIGHT FROM RESEARCH, RESOURCES OR SERVICES

The purpose of identifying insight from other sources is to help locate young people's perceptions and lived experience in a broader context, and where possible to provide further evidence to support the stress which young people have given to an issue, in this section regarding *social media*.

Some particulars about social media evidence how important this insight topic is.

- **16 to 24 year olds use social media more than other groups.**
- Snapchat (an image messaging app) is the fastest growing messaging app.
- In just 9 months in 2014 Instagram (a photo sharing network) grew in number of users by 50% and is now bigger than Twitter; 300 million people globally use Instagram.
- Tumblr is used to create blogs; its active user base grew 120% globally in the last 6 months of 2014, signing up 120,000 new users every day.
- 1 in 3 smartphone users in the UK use the messaging app WhatsApp.
- 32 million people use Facebook in the UK; 3.4 million are aged 12 to 17-years old and 5 million aged 18 to 24-years old.
- It is estimated young people use their smartphones on average 2 hours a day, using 6 apps each day.

A major concern about young people's online activity is the practice of '**sexting**'. In information for young people ChildLineⁱ describes it as "when someone sends or receives a sexually explicit text, image or video on their mobile phone, usually in a text message". Concerns extend to online groomingⁱⁱ of young or vulnerable people. **Information and advice for young people about navigating sex and relationships online** is also available via Thinkuknowⁱⁱⁱ, as well as information about sexting and the law, reflecting concerns that young people can be criminalised by creating and sharing pornographic images^{iv}. Stop it Now^v provides information and support for parents and young adults who are concerned about internet use.

Young people will also read about sexting, online and in social media. Attitudes toward sexting are reported in a recent Huffington Post^{vi} article where research commissioned by a law firm is reported to have found that around half of women and one-third of men considered sending sexual images and texts as 'cheating'. Meanwhile celebrities like model Leomie Anderson (with nearly 50,000 Instagram followers) also make public statements encouraging young people to be cautious about what they share^{vii}; "Saying no doesn't make you scared or frigid, it makes you smart".

In recent work (funded by condom manufacturer Durex) Mark McCormack^{viii} of Durham University has explored **the impact of technology and smartphones on romance, intimacy and sex** for people in long-term relationships. Using in-depth, qualitative interviews the research shows that while smartphones are central to romantic relationships, particularly in the early stages of dating, 12 of the 30 interviewees in the small study also used smartphones to send sexual pictures to each other. But technology is also a cause of stress and tension, particularly when

phones and social media getting in the way of face-to-face interaction and time together.

Laura Widman^{ix} and colleagues (US based) have examined **the extent to which adolescents use technology to discuss sexual topics with dating partners**, and the associations between technology-based communication and condom use. The team were interested in the positive use of communication via technology, rather than a common focus on 'risks' of private technology such as 'sexting'. Via a questionnaire, 16 and 17-year-old participants were asked if they used texting, Snapchat or private Facebook messaging to talk about topics like birth control, pregnancy risk and sexually transmitted infections. Nearly half of participants said they used technology to discuss at least one sexual health topic with a dating partner, and nearly 20 percent said they used it to talk about all six topics listed on the questionnaire. The most commonly discussed topics were sexual limits and condom use, and the least-discussed item was HIV/AIDS. The authors suggest that **there is a need to further explore whether technology provides a new or more effective way for young people to talk with each other about sexual health matters**.

Looking beyond how young people use social media or technology within a relationship the insight topic of SOCIAL MEDIA might also suggest that sexual health service providers should be engaging with young people online – this of course is already happening across Scotland. In the US, Rachel Jones and Ann Biddlecom^x explored the question 'Is the internet filling the sexual health information gap for teens?' They found that although there is a growth in online fact-based information and forums that provide teenagers the opportunity to ask questions in confidence, the young people interviewed did not consider it the main or trusted source of information about the issues; instead reporting that they had greater trust in sources such as school, family and friends. Where young people were making assessments about trustworthiness of online information they were more likely to use and trust a site where they perceived it to be official, where information was provided by medical sources, and when the information cross-checked or supported other sources. The authors report that young people are wary of online information because their internet and social media use exposes them to so much material that they might not like or want. At the moment the authors argue that **"...the Internet reflects more potential than reality as a substantive source of sexual health information for teens"**.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION POINTS

When it comes to the insight offered by young people and other sources important themes and issues have been highlighted. These are summarised below and discussion points are highlighted. Again, some attention is given to the use of insight from this project in terms of the use of social marketing to promote positive sexual health for young people.

The importance and benefits of communication

Insight from young people evidences that having a social media presence is the norm and that friendships and romantic relationships can be enhanced in this space. Young people also understand some of the tensions and stresses that can arise. In another insight chapter COMMUNICATION also published at www.makeitgoodtayside.org some emphasis was given to the importance of promoting communication with partners as protective, particularly where young people are better able to communicate about boundaries, wants, desires, condoms and contraception. Research identified earlier also points to online communications as a means by which young people can talk about what they want when it comes to sex and sexual health. Keeping in mind concerns about privacy (and a lack of control about what can happen to a message once sent) services and supports for young people would benefit from further consideration of how to engage with technology, the internet and social media as they frame much of a young person's interactions with peers and partners.

Choosing to focus on risks or 'the good relationship'

Young people's use of social media can overly focus on concerns about sharing sexual/sexualised images and messages. Straightforward information provision and online campaigns have been used to warn young people about the consequences of sharing images they later regret, other important messages are emerging for young people about legal aspects of their creating and sharing images. Young people themselves have given us some insight into the practice of sexting, but if we are to use insight from across this programme of work it is necessary to recognise a bigger message, that there is a need to shift emphasis in services and communication/marketing from the negative to the positive. For example, this means identifying what young people want from the good relationship – trust, happiness, love, respect, pleasure – and using this to frame engagement with them. It might be hoped that in this positive focus young people are more likely to work out how to behave and what to expect in the online aspects of their friendships and relationships.

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