



# The Youth of **TODAY**

by DK



“Hanging with friends at bus-stops, talking in their own language, wearing similar clothes, complaining, dyeing their hair astonishing colours such as pink and purple and blue — the elderly generation in the UK have nothing in common with the youth of today!”

I have used this statement many times to open presentations, training or debates — it tackles the issue of stereotyping and explores many of the prejudices that exist towards young people — attitudes that are propagated by the media and nurtured by other institutions.

In society today it is harder to be a young person than ever before. Yes there is much more material wealth and the standard of living across the Western world has risen dramatically but there are so many other issues and pressures that never existed a generation ago.

What follows are not answers, more statements and observations gleamed from working directly with young people and through conversations with other professionals and associates. You will also note direct quotes from young people themselves regarding the issues discussed, giving you a greater understanding into their opinions and views.

At times these will be obvious, specific, surprising, controversial, universal, silly and mad, definitely contradictory which is reflective of young people — they are an organic mass of individuals who are striving to find their place in this world ... can't you remember what it was like?

## IDENTITY

Many young people's actions (or inactions) can be directly linked to seeking association with a particular group, scene, attitude etc. from which their identity is formed. Even though there

is a distinct need for individuality the need to belong is paramount. It is a crucial and integral paradox: to strive for individuality through association — to form their ‘individual-cult’.

“ I just feel like a little tiny dot in a massive canvas of colour!”

— Nick, 18

Through technology the world has become a much smaller place in the last 20 ... 10 ... 5 years but increasingly crowded and complex. Pressure to ‘belong’ has exploded with young people being acutely aware that their world is more a popularity contest than ever before (see [Brands/Labels](#)).

“ Everyone needs their own identity and at the moment the world seems to be full of clones!”

— Rosie, 16

Identity is no longer formed through traditional demographic structures but influenced and dictated by chosen social cliques. Young people freely adopt fashions and trends from other cultures and communities which is brought to them through their contacts and world peers (accessible through technology).

“ I hate being labeled as someone who worships the devil and self-harms just because I wear black and listen to Marilyn Manson.”

— Tony, 16

There is unprecedented commercial pressure, supported by strong marketing messages, for young people to attain their identity through commodification. In the past few decades there

has been a material youth identifier of the time: 50s was the car, 60s was the stereo, 70s was the flares, 80s the Walkman, 90s the games console — 00s sees a plethora of items from the iPod to the mobile phone.

For young people, identity is a fractured arena full of pressure and choice. There are so many groups to which to belong: Emos, Goths, Sportos, Skaters, Punks, Townies, Riders, Techno's, Geeks etc. — however, remember that it will probably change by next week.

## POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

Young people are extremely politicised — even if they don't mean to be. In 2003, the UK saw the biggest uprising of political student campaigning against the government since the 1970s (protesting about the invasion of Iraq).

“I want to make a difference and I think getting involved in politics can do that, at the moment though I'm finding it very difficult to decide who is representing me, because from where I'm standing it looks like there is nobody.”

— Georgia, 15

Most young people are 'single-issue' focused but it does not mean they are bereft of wider political will or opinions. However, do the young people identify with any of those people who 'are supposed to represent' them? The last local authority I worked for had 64 councillors, the majority of which were white, male and had an average age of 62 ...

The face of politics needs to change. The recent change in the UK means 18 year-olds can now stand for local council elections (although, you still have to be 21 to stand for Parliament). This is a great opportunity to impact on politics and we are starting to see small numbers of young people taking on this challenge.

However, this generation is one of instants: they vote in reality shows and see the instant impact, their communication channels (email, text, IM) are instant, access to media such as music, videos, DVDs, instant — so why should their expectations of politics be any different?

“I think I’d be interested if they were more representative of real people, they don’t make it interesting enough for me to care.”

— Jules, 14

The introduction of the statutory subject ‘Citizenship’ into the UK educational curriculum is the Governments attempt to educate young people on the virtues and processes of governance (local, national and global). In a few years time young people will be leaving school with a much higher level of political literacy than ever before — I’m sure we can all applaud such an initiative, but are our Councils and their representatives ready for such a challenge.

What will happen when the young people start to demand that their elected councillors represent THEIR views (as they should)? What if they start referring back to the ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and demanding that their views and opinions be giving equal weight and consideration on matters and issues that concern them? What if they start to take a lead in campaigning for their right to influence the educational system/ planning policies/leisure provision/pricing structures of public services etc.? Are the ‘powers-that-be’ ready for such a challenge?

## BRANDS/LABELS

Brands/labels are extremely important to young people, although probably for the wrong reasons. For most it is an extension of their identity, for others it's merely a status symbol, but for some it can be alienating.

“ I feel real pressure to have all the best brands and labels, not just from my mates but from adverts and the way things are sold to us.”  
— Andy, 16

The pressure to conform by adopting the latest brands/labels is still huge although we are now seeing a slow movement away from 'force-fed' trends. Young people are leading the co-creation movement and impacting on the design and development of brands. One of the reasons for this growth is necessity — due to the rising costs of specific trendy brands/labels, young people are simply becoming much more creative in developing their own.

“ I think people need to ask themselves about the conditions their objects/possession were made under — we have a moral obligation to change practices by choosing not to buy clothes from companies such as The Gap and Nike.”  
— Hannah, 17

What young people seek is authenticity — brands that make statements and promises which deliver — they don't want to be patronised or exploited. Media literacy and the breaking down of information barriers has meant brands/labels need to be transparent in their operations. And with the youth pound/dollar/yen being crucial to brands/labels, their need to demonstrate their 'retail-worth' is paramount.

“I will admit I wear labels to look like my mates, I don't want them laughing at me or taking the piss, sometimes they don't even look cool — like I don't like Burberry but round here if you don't want to get picked on you'll wear it!”

— Andrew, 12

It's all camouflage at the end of the day, it matters, but not as much as people think and sometimes not for the right reasons.

## SCHOOL

An associate of mine teaches a particularly tough group of young people and says lots of her colleagues spend half the lesson enforcing the rules of the school rather than teaching — enforcement, she says, is not engaging or teaching that young person anything. Having to deal with students who are still wearing their coats, chewing gum, have more than one earring in, are wearing trainers instead of shoes, skirts are too short etc. is much more important than involving them in a lesson or educating them apparently ...

“ My school is becoming less and less strict all the time, it’s hard for people to see, but overtime you notice a gradual lack of respect for the teachers and peers.”

— Emily, 15

I never liked school. On reflection my trouble was down to a mix of hormonal issues and unenthusiastic and stressed-out teachers. I can honestly say that there was only one teacher who ever took the time to engage me into some meaningful discussion about my schooling needs/wants. Teachers have so much to deal with and I respect them enormously but the system in which they operate in is all one-way...

“ Pupils in a school are treated in basically the same way as Computer chips in a PC factory ... more like commodities than individuals.”

— Max, 18

Young people understand the process and reward of gaining qualifications but are tied to the choices and structures available to them. It was only recently in the UK that young people were allowed to sit as members on their school governing body, however, they are still not allowed to vote on any of the issues or decisions being made. “Seen but not heard” springs to mind.

The whole educational system and curriculum is adult-led. Participation should play a greater role in developing the whole governance of schools.

For me it's about 'changing a culture not a structure' ... this can be applied to many discourse surrounding young people, so, one more time:

IT'S ABOUT CHANGING A CULTURE NOT A STRUCTURE.

## RESPONSIBILITY

Responsibility is a by-product of power. Young people very rarely have the opportunity to fully understand the concept of responsibility because adults aren't comfortable in relinquishing power.

“Look at the government, adults are the LAST people to take responsibility for anything.”

— Jess, 19

In my last role as Corporate Youth Officer I recall refusing to consider setting up a Youth Council for the local authority. The request came from the council political leaders and was seen as their commitment to engaging young people into the decision-making process. Obviously, they were surprised by my refusal but for me it was a simple issue: youth councils will only work if the people at the top are ready to devolve power to that group. When I started outlining the issues the proposed youth council could have influence over such as planning, leisure pricing policies, events etc. (issues that directly affect their lives) the 'suits' quickly changed their mind and I knew the hardest part of my role was trying to change their perceptions rather than working with unruly teenagers.

“Can be OK but only if it has some kind of reward.”

— Suzy 16

I guess I have been lucky with the young people I have worked with but even in discussions with past colleagues and current associates, when you give young people power and responsibility they very rarely let you down. It's about tapping into the right 'reward' for that young person — which usually is not money and can be as simple as providing biscuits at a particular meeting!

## PARENTS

It seems to be a universal common denominator — parents suck. The separation of generations coupled with the aggravation of authority leads to conflict. Some youngsters don't have a good word to say while others will surprisingly tell you (through gritted teeth) how cool theirs are.

“I learnt when I was about eight that my parents aren't indestructible.

It was when I found my mum collapsed and unconscious in our bathroom.”

— Hannah, 17

Parents do have power. And in the debate of 'nurture vs. nature' I have to conclude, young people are products of their environment. Through all the media weight and peer influence it is still the parents values that the young people adopt. Do not underestimate the power that

parents have over the emotional and social well-being of their offspring — even when there is little or no communication between the parties.

“ My parents divorced when I was seven, and it was the worst time of my life until I was around eleven, it’s no pleasant thing for a young, only-child to go through, you feel so alone... but looking back now I have no regrets and know that my parents have done everything they can to bring me up right, we never really argue and respect each other.”  
— Emily, 15

Respect for elders exists. However, during adolescence, young people are striving to become more independent and are constantly testing their boundaries. They act like mirrors, respecting those who they deem to respect them. If they get treated like children they will behave like children — in the end they are not arguing with you but at themselves.

If you still aren’t convinced and you need more guidance you can always purchase one of the new range of ‘help-books’ for parents ... written by teenagers.

## IDOLS

So who do you think young people idolise? Football players, pop-princesses or movie stars? Again, this is linked to identity as many young people admire those people who they feel some connection towards. Although, many youngsters understand the concept of fame they are now questioning many of the ‘stars’ right to have it. The explosion of contest shows such

as Pop Idol has given many ‘ordinary’ people the opportunity to taste fame and young people a flavour of how fickle it is.

“Mankind has a tendency to aspire to things, even if they’re not really worth aspiring to.”

— Suzy, 16

Again, it is left up to the media to present many of the young peoples idols. Football is huge in terms of its column inches, media exposure and financial investment. The players are more than sportsmen, they are superstars with salaries and lifestyles to match. However, why is that every week there are displays of disrespect between players and towards referees, coins being thrown at players and even physical farrays on and off the pitch? Are these really the role models we want our youngsters to aspire to?

“As a disabled person, however, when I was young I had no real role models/idols.”

— Max, 18

The editor of the high-profile girls magazine Sugar recently summed it up well when she said “teens are more savvy than ever, they demand much more from their idols than just to look good and have money, they want them to be kick-ass and to have something to aspire to, something that if they worked hard, they could achieve.”

## BEING YOUNG

Remember when you were young? Who were your friends and what were your shared interests? What music were you into and what was the craze at that time? What are the main issues for you and what scared or excited you in the world? Do you still have something from your childhood that you will keep forever?

“I love it! The best thing you get in life is to be young and freeeeee!  
Make the most of it!”

— Rosie, 16

There seems to be a growing divide between those young people who find being young a struggle to those who easily adapt and embrace this time of their lives. I think we can all reflect with a smile and a frown at certain memories and instances from our youth, however, young people today face so many more issues than we ever did.

“It’s definitely not the best time of your life! There’s a lot of shit that happens, but I wouldn’t be 13-17 again if you paid me!”

— Jess, 19

In the public sector there has been a huge shift into understanding the positive effects of involving young people in policy and service creation/analysis. Participation is the new gospel and even though I can ascribe to most of the virtues and have in the past adopted many of them myself, I am a little critical in how participation is organised. The norm is to impose adult structures on young people. Is it right to expect a group of youngsters to form a ‘con-

stituted' group and adopt roles such as Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer when all they want is a skate park?

## DREAMS/HOPES

Young people are an optimistic bunch and their expectations are radically different from the generation before. Dreams and hopes are the source of this optimism. This optimism should be nurtured and cultivated into motivation. Any youth worker, parent or teacher will know enthusiasm is motivations driver and is the holy grail when working with young people.

“Young people are allowed to dream today like never before! We are allowed to think we can be whatever we want to be — regardless of sex background race or anything else for that matter!”

— Max, 18

It could be argued that in today's globalised and hyperlinked world everything seems that bit more attainable and accessible — young people are making money out of playing video games, amateurs are becoming the professionals and trendspotters covet the fashion of the teen generation for ideas. However, when you speak to young people their dreams and hopes are very simple and based entirely on being happy.

“I hope the world reverts back to a simpler life where quality not quantity is seen as a status symbol.”

— Hannah, 17

## CRIME

Young people are more likely to be a victim of crime than a perpetrator, however, looking at the mainstream media you'd be fooled in thinking otherwise. Recent studies have shown that 9 out of 10 news stories about young people are negative — is this reporting the facts or lazy journalism? The National Youth Agency (UK) has recently launched its Positive Images campaign to try and stem this negative coverage and redress the balance by promoting positive news stories of young people.

There is also a general misconception that young people hanging around the streets or parks constitutes a criminal act — why? It was never perceived that way when I was doing the same (and that was only a little over a decade ago).

“The media portrays all young people as criminals. The police don't treat young people with respect, and view all young people as one group. Sure some young people might mouth off, but just because one does doesn't mean all will.”

— Andy, 16

In my last job I project managed a youth magazine written, designed and edited by young people for their peers. Each term we had on average about 20/25 young people all taking an active role in its development. After the magazine got established, many agencies started to refer young people onto the project — the local Youth Offending Team was one such agency, referring young people as part of their 'Reparation Orders'. A couple joined the designer team and one edited but two youngsters chose to write a reflective piece on their experiences of the crimes they committed, the damage it caused and their subsequent arrest and charge.

They were moving pieces on the acceptance of their actions, understanding its impact and the positive outcomes they are now gaining.

“The other day I went to a party and the police turned up 3 times and no one was doing anything wrong!”

— Rosie, 16

I’m not saying all young people are angels or victims of a global media-hate campaign, what I am saying is the majority of young people today do not commit crime, that’s a fact, but the majority of news coverage and public perception is the opposite. Also, when people make mistakes the only way to make things right is by being given the opportunity too — it’s no different with young people.

## FRIENDS

I’ll let the young people take this one...

“I feel really sorry for people who, for instance, eat their lunch on their own, I know it’s strange but I’ve always felt something for that person, even if it’s me!”

— Emily, 15

“...A life without friends would be totally shit and worthless!”

— Max, 18

“ Friends are cups of tea, getting tipsy, linking arms, sharing popcorn, stupid photographs, in-jokes, and big hugs.”

— Hannah, 17

## TECHNOLOGY

The multi-tasking generation has been born: technological-minded, media-savvy, marketing-literate — filtering out adverts whilst researching their homework assignment on the Net, emailing a friend, playing an online computer game and texting their friends about a social event ...

In their world technology is ubiquitous and not a differentiator (unless you don't have a phone or access to a computer). However, technology is used as a tool to communicate first and entertain second. And because it is ingrained in their culture it is harder to impress young people with new gadgets or ranges.

“ Technology has its uses but it's not fascinating like art.”

— Hannah, 17

Marketers are using technological avenues and mediums more and more. The growth of 'AdverGames' is testament — where Pepsi or McDonalds sponsor an appearance in the latest computer games — although, in my opinion, this will not have much affect. Young people are already masters of 'dodging-the-message' and to embed it into a video game will not be effective.

Technology is also continuing to aid the stereotyping of young people. I recently visited the central office for all the local CCTV cameras in my town with a young person (it was for an article they were writing). This girl questioned the operators on what they are trained to look for — the response was interesting (but not surprising).

The operators, who are the extended eyes of the police force, monitor and track small groups or individuals specifically between the ages of 14–20 and usually male — all fair you may say, but recently in London police became aware of the ‘Suit Gang’. A group of young adults who knew that by dressing in suits they would be exempt from monitoring and free to carry on their pick-pocketing.

“ If you want to succeed at school you need to have good technology at home to research on the net. That puts real pressure on the family.”  
— Andy, 16

Hopefully though, technology can be used to break down social barriers. We are already seeing African school children in remote areas being linked through simple technological systems so that they have an opportunity to ‘attend’ virtual classes and gain an education.

With the advent of the £100 laptop how long before schools in the developed world will begin to issue these to their pupils with pre-loaded texts that can be easily uploaded, rather than investing in books.

## THE ENVIRONMENT

Talk to nearly every young person and they will tell you that the environment is something that needs due consideration. In many consultations I have undertaken in my time, recycling or environmental concerns are always in the top 3 issues that they feel are most important to them.

“I’m scared about what is happening to our environment and I think it should be high up on the government agenda — recycling should be the law.”

— Maz, 15

Why is the most disempowered section of society also the ones who want to make the biggest changes to help the planet and other environmental issues. Is this a coincidence? There is genuine concern about the state of this planet and governments, charities, voluntary groups, even brands, need to create opportunities for young people to make a difference. There is a large section of society out there who only need the right motivation to be involved ... what are you waiting for?

“Do you think George Bush has seen ‘Day after Tomorrow?’ Because if he had I think he’d start taking global issues a lot more seriously.”

— Martin, 15

I’m no ‘tree-hugger’ but for me the following saying sums it up gracefully:

We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children.

## RELIGION

In this ever-declining religious world is there room for this topic in discussing young people. I think there is. Many of the continual global issues are religiously aligned and therefore the subject needs to be on the agenda when talking to young people.

“I can see why people need religion (it can be a great comfort to some) and I don't think it's a bad thing, but it can't be good for you if it narrows your vision of the world rather than widening it.”

— Hannah, 17

In the last few years, the Iraq war, the recent London bombings and other continual international conflicts have produced a lot of religious diatribe that has confused young people. Again, education and discussions need to be undertaken to discuss these issues.

## OLD PEOPLE

Although I started this manifesto with a little joke at the older generations expense, like young people, there is a parity of issues for them to face: poor travel access, prejudiced attitudes, a feeling of neglect by society, a reliance on public services and an over-whelming desire for biscuits at all times of the day.

“ I love ’em! They are sooo wise and they are kool! They just have different views on stuff but their views are still valid! They’ve lived a whole lot longer than us so we can learn tons from them.”

— Rosie, 16

Young people do respect their elders (see [Parents](#) and quote above) but more to the point how many older people respect young people? Some of the best youth workers I have met in my time are definitely not young (although I wouldn’t call them old either) and they have no problems gaining respect from the youngsters they work with. It’s all about attitude.

There is an obvious opportunity and need to bring these two generations together. Why not develop projects where the older generation teach young people how to play bowls, cards or dominoes and then the following week the youngsters teach them DJing, Playstation games and rap...

## SEX

We all know it sells and studies have shown it’s the main reason why so many young people want access to the Net, so, lets start with the truth — young people are having it! And if they’re not, their certainly thinking about it, talking about it, feeling pressured to do it or are facing issues surrounding it.

“I really don’t like the idea of being pregnant so early on in life, and contraception still isn’t enough to put a girl’s mind at ease when her period’s late... (too graphic?).”

— Emily, 15

Young people undress to impress nowadays. They are grasping sexuality and its power at a much younger age even though they do not have the life-tools and experience to face the negative issues and consequences of such actions.

“What’s with the image of sex on telly though? It’s all easy and romantic and clean, routine ... Real life isn’t like that with perfect hair and to-die-for make-up and confidence!”

— Jess, 19

In the past I have supported detached youth workers working at under 18s/16s club nights. The level at which young people use their sexuality — especially the young girls — is astonishing. Writing in white pen that shows up in fluorescent lights the words ‘Buy me a drink if you fancy me!’, across the tops of their breasts is a scary site to behold (and that’s just one of the tamest stories!). I have also observed when the time comes towards the end of these nights a good percentage of these young girls rushing to the toilets to change into the clothes their parents dropped them off in.

For many it’s about education and choice. Professionals know that there is no way to stop young people being exposed to sexual imagery or subjects in magazines, films, TV, Internet, but what we can strive to do is educate and hope they can make informed choices.

## EPILOGUE

I know this manifesto holds a very optimistic view of young people — what can I say, I'm unapologetically positive. My experiences (of working directly with young people, out of political institutions, with other public/voluntary/charitable sector organisations and for commercial brands/companies) has created an optimistic understanding of the issues relating to young people. I hope I and the many quotes from the youth demographic have shared and created that optimism — after all, we were all young once...

If all this talk about young people has left you in reflective mood for your youth, then maybe you should consider moving to a place with a more 'liberal' definition age, which might give you the opportunity to become young again:

- Malta 35
- Turkmenistan 37
- Malaysia 40

*...Bon Voyage!*

## SPECIAL THANKS:

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# info

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phatgnat Founder, DK, has over 5 years public sector experience working across all fields of leisure, from arts and sports development, youth magazines and anti-social behaviour projects, child protection, events and community development, numerous consultations, policy creation and skatepark development. DK held the unique role of ‘Corporate Youth Officer’ for a local authority, the first and only in the UK at that time. It was in this role that he continued to develop his skills and projects working directly with young people and across all sectors, bringing together unique and productive partnerships.

DK has recently founded Phatgnat — working in partnership with the private sector, local government and youth organisations, Phatgnat creates opportunities for brands to engage directly with young people through projects that also serve the wider community while delivering measurable, high returns for its clients.

Visit DK’s homepage: [www.phatgnat.dk](http://www.phatgnat.dk) and/or weblog [www.phatgnat.typepad.com](http://www.phatgnat.typepad.com)

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