REPORT 1: IDENTITY
**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**WELCOME TO YOUTH STATE.**

At Adjust Your Set we recognise the challenge marketers face in trying to connect authentically with the complicated youth market and navigate a world that changes faster than you can send a Snapchat. This report delves deep inside the heads of 16-24 year olds in the UK to find out what they’re really thinking.

Using a rigorous blended methodology of quantitative and qualitative research bolstered by expert contributions, Youth State sets out to help brands to engage and communicate with young consumers in a meaningful and valuable way.

In this report, the first in the series, we have uncovered valuable insights for marketers.

For instance, today’s youth are most empowered by the things in life that are closest to them and therefore within their immediate control. Personal relationships are particularly empowering; when asked who they most admire, it was family members who dominated the responses with ‘Mum’ taking the top spot.

In fact their everyday heroes were far more commonly cited than celebrities, showing that there is little patience for vacuous famous faces. Only those who make positive contributions to society, such as Emma Watson in her role as UN Women Goodwill ambassador, made the cut.

But this grounded and rational outlook is not being widely recognised by the rest of the world. Our respondents are frustrated by the way in which they see their generation being represented. They rate the accuracy of their portrayal as a mere 4.4 out of 10, seeing themselves presented as disruptive, materialistic, vain and tech obsessed.

Moreover, they feel very strongly about the impossible standards of beauty and lifestyle aspirations foisted upon them by media and marketing. The messages that they encounter from brands and publications simply do not reflect the things they really care about.

What they truly value are traits associated with strong character. Authenticity is highly important to them: for 35%, what they most admire in others is not being afraid to be oneself.

Happiness too is hugely important to this cohort. For over half of our sample happiness was their number one value in life. For a generation who have had to move their focus away from pursuing material wealth, enriching experiences that make them happy are the priority.

Overall the results of this research paint a picture of a considered and conscientious generation. Reckless hedonism and rebellion are no longer a part of their agenda. Instead they care deeply about the people and things that will help them to build a secure and happy future.

So it is vital that brands acknowledge this mature mentality and treat young people with the respect that they deserve.

This could involve reducing the pressure to lead the perfect aspirational lifestyle, or perhaps it’s about creating enriching, joyful experiences. Whatever your approach, communicating and engaging with this age group ultimately comes down to demonstrating authenticity, transparency and humanity.

These findings and recommendations are discussed in greater detail throughout the report. By listening to what young people themselves have to say, we have sought to enable you to truly understand this audience, and we hope that this report will guide you in how best to position your brand as something they can really care about.
EMPOWERMENT
2. **EMPOWERMENT**

In order to assess the state of empowerment amongst young people, we have selected a broad spectrum of key elements in their lives that may impact empowerment.

These divide into personal elements that relate to the individual’s own life, and collective elements that affect us all at society level.

Each element was selected for inclusion as a potential major influence on young people’s sense of empowerment, as things that affect their ability, their agency and that give them a sense of possibility in life.

Each element is then measured on a scale of how much influence respondents feel they have over it, and how much it contributes to the life they want to live right now.

The combination of these measures gives a more detailed map of empowerment in young people’s lives.

The personal elements comprise: working life, education, personal relationships, health and wellbeing and personal financial situation. The collective elements are: politics, the economy, the environment, global crises and technological development.

### 2.1 EMPOWERMENT OVERVIEW

**PERSONAL:** How much influence do you feel you currently have in each? (MEAN)

The general pattern that emerges from examining which areas of life are most empowering to 16-24 year olds, is that personal elements are more empowering than the collective.

The personal elements contribute more to them living the life they want to lead right now as well as being the things they feel they have more influence over. These are the things that are closer to home for them, they are more aware of the impact these factors have on their lives.

Looking at the collective elements’ impact on the life they want to lead right now, there is a strong pattern of apathy with mean figures hovering around 0 on the -5 to +5 scale. This tells us that a significant proportion of respondents feel that these factors are not making any difference.

Let’s take a look at each of the elements in greater detail.
PERSONAL: To what extent does each help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW? (MEAN)

- 5 = holds me back a great deal
0 = has no effect whatsoever
5 = helps me a great deal

COLLECTIVE: To what extent does each help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW? (MEAN)

- 5 = holds me back a great deal
0 = has no effect whatsoever
5 = helps me a great deal
2.2 PERSONAL: KEY POINTS

• Respondents report a relatively high level of influence over their working life, but it’s not making such a positive contribution to the life they want. This is possibly due to unrealistic career expectations and the pressure of a ‘love what you do’ culture.

• Education is particularly empowering; results show high levels of influence and it contributes positively to the life young people want to lead. This is unsurprising as education is presented as the means to getting ahead in life in our society.

• Like education, personal relationships are highly empowering. Family in particular plays an important role in enabling the Boomerang Generation.

• Influence is relatively high for health and wellbeing, but results are less pronounced when it comes to how much of a positive contribution it’s making to the life they want to lead. Good health may be taken for granted by young people who should largely be in relatively good shape. However growing awareness of mental health issues could be impacting this result.

• Empowerment in personal finance is not so high, which is to be expected amongst an age group with high levels of unemployment, low salaries and in which some are still financially dependent.
2.2 Personal: Working Life

How much influence do you feel you currently have in your working life / apprenticeship?

Our respondents feel they have an encouraging level of influence over their working life; 73% rate it between 6 and 10. And over half (56%) feel work is actually having a positive impact on their life right now – empowering them to live the life they want to lead.

This is an uplifting finding given that they are probably at the very start of their careers, and are unlikely to hold their dream job yet. Or if they are lucky enough to start every Monday with a mini fist-pump, then they are probably relatively low down within organisations. Very few are living the dream of self-employment – a mere 3.8% of 16-24 year olds are self-employed, so these positive results should probably not be interpreted as the smugness of young entrepreneurs.

To what extent does your working life/apprenticeship help you to live the life you want right now?

It may be that the respondents to this question recognise their good fortune in having a job at all, given that the unemployment rate amongst 16-24 year olds stands at 14.4%, it's highest rate in 20 years and three times the level of unemployment for the rest of the population.

Nonetheless there are 24% who say that their working life has no effect whatsoever on helping them live the life they want to lead right now.
In part this may be due to the cultural pressure to ‘do what you love’. This unrealistic standard creates divisions in society and devalues a great deal of important work that may not be anyone’s passion. So if young people do not love what they do, their work may be falling short of a culturally conditioned expectation and causing them dissatisfaction.

It is particularly hard not to subscribe to this doctrine of working life given the visibility of ‘dream jobs’ held by bloggers and reality TV stars. Young people are confronted by peers who are being paid vast amounts to pursue their dreams (or at least make videos about their dreams). Indeed, YouTube star PewDiePie recently uploaded a video in response to a furore over the revelation that he earned $7.4m last year from his vlogging activity.

By comparison, many young people of a similar age may feel that their own jobs are unfulfilling. This might partly explain the explosion of anger in response to PewDiePie’s earnings. Nonetheless, overall respondents reported feeling more empowered than not in regards to their work. Any hesitation may be down to the fact that their jobs are more likely to contribute to their ideal lifestyle in future once they have built a career, than it does at present.

**2.2 PERSONAL: EDUCATION**

*How much influence do you feel you currently have in your education?*

There is a strong positive profile across both measurements for education – it is evidently important in empowering young people: 34% gave a top 2 box score, whilst a quarter (24%) selected the highest level of influence on the scale. When it comes to the extent that education helps them to live the life they want right now, 41% selected the top 2 box scores on the scale and close to a third (29%) say it has the maximum level of positive impact. Times have changed: school has become the height of cool.
To what extent does your education help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?

![Graph showing responses to the question](image)

- 5 = holds me back a great deal
0 = has no effect whatsoever
5 = helps me a great deal

Amongst those in our sample who are in education, the majority are over 18, and therefore are voluntarily in some form of higher education (in England, those currently aged 18 and under must now legally stay in some kind of full or part time education or training until they turn 18 so we know its not a choice for them).

This could be contributing to why the total sample feel so strongly empowered by it – they are more likely to feel that education contributes positively to their life if they have chosen to continue with it, especially if they are willing to pay the significant expense of tuition fees.

Another possible explanation for the high levels of empowerment in education is the cultural emphasis placed on intelligence and academic success.

The government stresses the importance of education in its discussion around the recent rise in school leaving age from 16 to 18:

“...we want to ensure all young people have the tools and opportunities they need to fulfil their potential, regardless of background or life circumstances. We believe that all young people should have access to local and national opportunities to develop skills for life and work and to create a more responsible, engaged and cohesive society.”

Education is presented as a necessary means to a good life. Clearly the message has taken hold as the number of university applicants reached a record high this January.

In fact, the pressure to gain a good education is so great that it has become a leading cause of concern for children; the NSPCC has reported a 200% rise in the number of young people seeking counselling for exam stress.

Although it may be a source of great pressure for many, the message here is that our respondents are highly empowered in and by education.
2.2 Personal: Personal Relationships

How much influence do you feel you currently have in your personal relationships?

Personal relationships are also significantly empowering to these young people: 82% rate their influence in personal relationships within the upper half of the scale, and over a quarter (27%) gave a top 2 box score. Showing similarly high scores, 71% rate the contribution of their personal relationships to the life they want to lead right now as positive rather than negative, with 28% sitting within the top 2 boxes. Family and friends are clearly very important.

“We do care about our family, and a lot of the time people think we don’t” - Siobhan, 18

To what extent do your personal relationships help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?

Much has been written about the ‘Boomerang Generation’; young people still living with their parents due to the crippling cost of living and lack of jobs. Indeed, in 2013, 49% of 20-24 year olds were living with their parents. So family may well be a life raft for many of our respondents struggling to achieve independence. The importance of their personal relationships could reflect acknowledgement of their reliance on Mum and Dad, especially when it comes to the contribution of these relationships to the life they want to lead right now.
2.2 PERSONAL: HEALTH & WELLBEING

How much influence do you feel you currently have in your health & wellbeing?

Our young respondents feel they have a fairly high level of influence over their health and wellbeing; 79% rate their influence between 6 and 10. And just over a quarter (26%) rate their influence as 9 or 10 out of 10.

This shouldn’t come as a great surprise given that those aged between 16 and 24 should be enjoying prime physical health. Indeed, footballers hit their peak before they reach their mid 20s.\(^{11}\)

To what extent does your health & wellbeing help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?

A more modest 56% rate the contribution of their health and wellbeing to the life they want to lead right now as positive rather than negative, though there are still roughly a quarter (24%) within the top 2 boxes.

It is much easier to see how poor health holds you back in life, than to appreciate how good health contributes to it by the simple virtue of not holding you back.

Given that debilitating health concerns are less common amongst young people, it is likely that the less pronounced contribution of health and wellbeing to the ideal life is the result of our respondents taking good health for granted.

For 25% of them however, health and wellbeing is actively detracting from the life they want to lead right now.
There has been a great deal of discussion this year around the state of mental health services in the UK.

The issue was touched on in each of the major party manifestos prior to the general election, with specific reference to better mental health support for children by Labour and the Liberal Democrats.\textsuperscript{12}

It is fitting that mental health should receive greater prominence on the nation’s agenda as findings show that mental illnesses are on the rise; 1 in 6 16-24 year olds now has a common mental disorder.\textsuperscript{13}

Perhaps this blight on wellbeing could account for some of the quarter of respondents here who feel that their health is actually holding them back. Especially given this age group’s emphasis on happiness which we explore later in the report.

### 2.2 PERSONAL: PERSONAL FINANCE

**How much influence do you feel you currently have in your personal financial situation?**

Empowerment scores for personal finance are spread more evenly across the scale compared with other metrics. We see almost a 60:40 split between the upper and lower halves of the scale of influence respectively. This indicates that young people have relatively less influence over their personal financial situation than other elements of their lives.

**To what extent does your personal financial situation help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?**

- 5 = holds me back a great deal
- 0 = has no effect whatsoever
- 5 = helps me a great deal
When it comes to whether or not it helps them live the life they want right now, it’s actively holding them back more than helping them: 50% rate its contribution negatively compared to only 39% who rate it in the positive half of the scale.

But what exactly is it holding them back from? If money is a means to an end, what is the end they are aspiring to?

A study by live events company Eventbrite found that 66% of Millennials felt more fulfilled by live experiences than purchasing an item of the same value.¹⁴

Young people are driving the ‘experience economy’, and so a lack of empowerment within their personal finances prevents them from having life enriching experiences.

**How much influence do you feel you currently have in your personal financial situation?**

1 = no influence at all   10 = a great deal of influence

When the results are broken down by age, older respondents feel that they have more influence over their personal financial situation than the younger cohort.

Amongst 20-24 year olds, 63% rate their influence between 6 and 10 compared to only 54% of 16-19 year olds.*

This is likely because more of the latter age group are still financially dependent and therefore have less control over how much money they either earn or receive.

That said, of those in the older age group who are working, they will be on relatively low salaries. Indeed, according to the Resolution Foundation the proportion of workers in their 20s who are now classed as low paid has more than tripled over the past 40 years.¹⁵

And EY research states that spending power for those in their 20s will continue to be squeezed, largely due to the above average unemployment rate that we have already discussed.¹⁶
Experiencing empowerment within the personal elements of young people’s lives immediately points to some easy win subjects for brands to focus on.

Firstly, we need to reflect the importance of education and friends and family in order to authentically communicate with this audience. These are the areas of their lives where young people feel the most empowered, so content, messaging, products and services that take this into consideration are likely to stand out and automatically appeal.

Health and wellness however, is an area from which they could potentially derive a greater sense of empowerment than they currently do. Brands could take the opportunity to remind young consumers not to take their health for granted (though beware of preaching). Sport England’s ‘This Girl Can’ campaign is a great example of marketing that does just this; it demonstrates the empowerment women can experience through exercise.

At a time when being healthy and fit is so culturally relevant and resonant, this is a powerful message. Instagram feeds are full of motivation for fitness, ‘athleisure’ wear is now more popular than denim\(^{17}\) and wellness has become the modern-day marker of luxury.\(^{18}\) Brands that can tap into this burgeoning trend and empower young people to achieve this ultimate status symbol will be well regarded.

Just beware of taking it too far and becoming so sanctimonious that everyone wants to pelt you with donuts.
2.3 COLLECTIVE: KEY POINTS

• Young people do not feel very empowered by politics – they have low levels of influence and feel fairly ambivalent if not outright negative about the impact it has on the life they want to lead.

• Politics as an institution is not accessible, political education in the UK is lacking and parties do not address the issues that young people actually care about.

• Results for the economy show a similar profile to politics: young people are not empowered by it. It is not an area of life that many individuals have much influence over, but young people have been particularly negatively affected by recent budgetary changes.

• Influence over the environment is somewhat higher; this is to be expected given the personal sense of responsibility and potential we have to take care of our planet. However respondents do not feel that it is impacting the life they want to lead much at all.

• Global crises offer very little empowerment; influence levels are low and over half report that they make no difference to helping them live the life they want to lead. The scale of many of these crises makes it unsurprising that respondents feel little ability to influence them, and their distance from the UK largely protects us from direct impact.

• Technological advancement presents an interesting tension; influence levels are low, but it contributes positively to young people living the life they want to lead.
2.3 COLLECTIVE: POLITICS

How much influence do you feel you currently have in politics/the government?

We see relatively low levels of empowerment in politics. Almost a quarter (24%) rate their influence as a mere 1 out of 10, and only a fifth (21%) rate their influence as over 5.

Inevitably this is in part because a proportion of our sample are under the age of 18 and not yet eligible to vote.

However there is also an accessibility issue at play. Politics isn’t made easy, it is not a welcoming subject to the uninitiated.

“I think it’s hard for the everyday man to try and get involved in politics, and that’s why they complain about it so much. Because they don’t know how to get involved and influence and change” – Alex, 20

Alex’s sentiment is echoed by Mita Desai, chair of the British Youth Council, who told us that the formality of politics is a major barrier to young people being more engaged: “politics should generally be accessible whereas its often seen as something that’s very exclusive … actually that knowledge shouldn’t be exclusive”. She went on to explain that this impression of politics leads young people to lack confidence in their own opinions.
MITA DESAI,
CHAIR OF THE
BRITISH YOUTH COUNCIL

Mita is a 24 year old Social Policy graduate and Chair of the British Youth Council Trustee Board. At 16 she signed up to a youth service and was introduced to a world where young people’s voices mattered and were able to make a difference on issues they were passionate about. Since then, she has been an ambassador for Britain in the 2009 ‘European Youth Exchange’ programme, a delegate for the 2010 ‘World AIDS Conference’ in Vienna, represented Birmingham University in UK debating tournaments and volunteered with: PASS, DebateMate, and Envision. In 2013 she managed a camp with the Fresh Air fund, a New York based charity, and won the “Institutional Employee of the Year” award after her role in marketing a University careers course led to a record enrolment rate. In 2015 she was appointed as an Advisory Council member for Step Up To Serve and was given an award from the British Dyslexia Association in recognition for her services towards Dyslexia. Mita currently works for The Challenge where she writes the curriculum for the Nation Citizen Service.

Better coverage of politics in the national curriculum might fuel greater political conviction amongst young people. Dr. Avril Keating, a senior Lecturer in Comparative Social Science at UCL’s Department of Lifelong and Comparative Education says of young adults: “the vast majority aren’t informed about political systems and political institutions, and information about Westminster politics is not particularly interesting to them”.

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Dr. Avril Keating has written extensively on citizenship education in England and Europe, and is the project leader for the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Studies (CELS). She is currently leading two projects that examine (a) the relationship between schools and societies, and (b) how the economic crisis affect youth opportunities and civic values.

In conversation on the matter in our focus groups, participants revealed that they don’t feel they have enough formal political education – a few cursory sessions within a very broad citizenship curriculum are all that many receive, which does nothing to aid in making politics more accessible to them.

This fact was picked up on by Kate Crowhurst writing in The Telegraph earlier this year: “A politics education curriculum … would equip young people with a grounding in political theory, the knowledge to dissect the views put forward by their representatives and the ability to debate with them on best policy practice.”

Indeed, the majority of information that young people encounter relating to politics comes from the media or their family, both of which have the potential to be highly biased sources. And whilst there is infinite information available to those who choose to seek it out, Dr. Keating points out that the difficulty lies in being able to interrogate it in order to build one’s own political opinions and identity: “There’s a lot of information out there and you need the critical literacy and the research literacy to be able to engage with and evaluate the material that you’re given”. This is the role that education ought to play, but without sufficient resourcing and teacher training it cannot hope to make a positive difference to young people’s sense of political empowerment.

To what extent does politics/the government help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?

It’s not just a lack of influence that our respondents feel, but also that politics does not make much of a positive difference to their lives: 43% rate the contribution of politics to helping them to live the life they want right now as outright negative, whilst close to a third (29%) claim it has no effect whatsoever.
This may in part be down to life stage; they don’t hold many responsibilities yet that are directly impacted by policy and as such it may not yet feel relevant to them personally.

“I think it’s mainly young people who don’t vote, because they’re not that interested. I know loads of people who don’t bother voting...they don’t see how it will affect them that much.” - Siobhan, 18

As Dr. Keating points out, this response is to be expected; at this age young people don’t have much cause to engage with the mechanisms of government: “if you’re young, free and single, how much contact do you have with state organisations… You’re not actively engaging with those [organisations] so how would it feel part of your life?”.

Nonetheless, despite this lack of contact with state organisations, and a lack of engagement with formal ‘politics’, young people do care about social issues. Desai says: “are young people engaged with politics? Yes, because I would define politics as social issues generally”.

But those issues that concern them most tend not to be the ones that political parties prioritise. As Dr. Keating comments: “the government … has been more focused on providing policy solutions for older groups and less for younger people”.

No wonder then that our respondents do not feel much of an impact of politics on helping them live as they would like to.

Emily Revess, ambassador for One Young World writes for the Huffington Post: “Young people are passionate about political and social issues, but feel that their views on these issues are not being taken seriously by our political system.”

And passionate they certainly are. They might not feel empowered by politics but they do show signs of wanting greater involvement. Despite the lack of accessibility to politics, our focus group participants spoke of actively trying to make sense of the political landscape themselves. For instance, some took one of a number online quizzes that cropped up prior to the election, designed to help young voters determine their personal political stance. And others mentioned friends who had joined political parties following the Conservative win in the general election.

Evidently there is a tension between caring deeply about issues that affect their lives and wanting to be able to effect change in those areas, and the frustrations of not being equipped to engage with the political machine.
2.3 COLLECTIVE: ECONOMY

How much influence do you feel you currently have in the economy?

The economy is just about as empowering to young people as politics. A whopping 83% rate their influence as 5 or below. And whilst 28% rate the extent the economy helps them live the life they want as none whatsoever, almost half (47%) rate it as negative.

The fate of the economy is strongly linked to politics, which goes some way to explaining the similarity in the profile of results.

To what extent does the economy help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?

When it comes to influence, the economy is also not something that the everyday citizen really has much direct influence over, regardless of age – it is largely controlled by business leaders, politicians and financial institutions.

But there are clear reasons why half of our sample feel the economy is to some extent holding them back. Firstly, the state of the economy plays an important role in the provision of jobs, and as we have already seen, youth unemployment is at a peak.

What’s more, the economic polarisation that has characterised Britain’s recovery disproportionately affects young people. And George Osborne’s Summer Budget revealed yet more measures that disadvantage those under 30, for instance removing automatic housing benefits for 18-21 year olds, and replacing university maintenance grants with loans.22
Finally, let us remember that the eldest members of this group were only 16 when the UK entered the recession. Their formative years have been marred by austerity, and as such it is to be expected that they would not feel particularly empowered by our economy.

2.3 COLLECTIVE: ENVIRONMENT

How much influence do you feel you currently have in the environment?

The results for the environment differ from the other collective elements we measured. There is a greater spread of results across the scale of influence, indicating that our respondents are less unanimous in their feelings about how much influence they have over the environment one way or another.

On balance they feel they have a slightly greater degree of influence than other elements (the mean is 4.6, the highest of the collective metrics).

In part it is likely that this is because this issue has been made more of a personal responsibility than others; everyone is encouraged to do their bit. The environment is after all directly impacted and shaped by our actions, whereas something like the economy is simply foisted upon most citizens. We feed into our environment; we feed off our economy.

What’s more, the things one can do for the environment are not restricted by age – whilst one must be 18 to vote for example, anyone of any age can choose to put their paper into a recycling bin. It is therefore something that young people are not excluded from contributing to.

That said, on balance they still feel they have less influence than more: 66% rated their influence as 5 or less.

This is probably because in the grand scheme of things, one individual’s actions count for very little in the wider war against climate change.

“It doesn’t help much if it’s just one person, and everyone else just doesn’t care” - Karina, 23
Meanwhile over 50% feel it has no effect whatsoever on helping them live the life they want right now. This might partly be because here in the UK, our climate (though more erratic in recent years) is still relatively stable. Severe weather changes such as tsunamis and hurricanes affect distant shores, and so the impact of environmental change can be easily distanced from our own day to day reality. This distance is not only geographical but chronological too; by the time the real impact of environmental change hits our planet, or the impact of any sustainability measures kick in, we won’t be around to experience it.

This, it transpires, is an acknowledged social issue:

“We know that climate change is seen by most people as an issue which is important for society to address, but at the same time is often viewed as temporally, geographically or socially distant from ordinary people’s everyday lives (Pidgeon, 2012). This has contributed to a ‘psychological distancing’ of people from the climate change issue, and is seen as one of the reasons for a consequent lack of public engagement (Spence et al., 2012).”

In addition, the emphasis on ‘being green’ dropped down the agenda when we entered the recession, as cost-saving became the top priority for most. This may also have contributed to a diminished sense of how much the threat of environmental change truly affects us.

2.3 COLLECTIVE: GLOBAL CRISSES

How much influence do you feel you currently have in global crises?

1 = no influence at all
10 = a great deal of influence
Our young audience feel they have very little influence when it comes to global crises; 88% rate their level of influence as 5 or below, and roughly a third rate it as a mere 1 out of 10.

Given the nature and scale of the most prevalent and recent global crises - the rise of ISIS, the outbreak of Ebola, the Ukraine conflict and the earthquake in Nepal to name a few - this may not come as a surprise. For many, these issues probably engender a sense of helplessness.

To what extent do global crises help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?

Unsurprisingly perhaps, 56% consider these crises to have no effect on helping them lead the life they want whatsoever.

Largely this is because, just as with the environment, in the UK we are distanced and protected from many of the worst global disasters. But with increasing reports of things like home grown extremists, immigrants taking desperate risks to reach our shores and the Greek debt crisis, it will be interesting to see if, over subsequent waves of data, we begin to see decreasing apathy towards these pertinent issues.

2.3 COLLECTIVE: TECH ADVANCEMENT

How much influence do you feel you currently have in tech advancement?
There is an interesting tension apparent when it comes to empowerment within technological advancement: on the one hand, young people feel a relative lack of influence (only 28% rated their influence at 5 or more out of 10), yet on the other they feel quite strongly that it helps them to live the life they want right now.

Indeed, despite a quarter deeming it to have no effect whatsoever, a further 69% rated it as having a positive influence. Technology is empowering, but they do not feel empowered to impact its development.

**To what extent does tech advancement help you to live the life you want RIGHT NOW?**

The tension may stem from the fact that this age group is young enough that they will have grown up with technology at their fingertips. Ofcom found that 16-24 year olds spend over 27 hours a week online. It is a key part of their daily life and as such is extremely valuable to them. However they are too old to benefit from the wave of technological education that has emerged in the last couple of years. For instance coding was only added to the national curriculum last September. So they are constantly engaged with technology that they don’t really understand the nuts and bolts of.

Technology is also a key driver in many social trends. We passively consume the latest tech innovations without question because they enhance our lives. And so if we only realise after the fact that we couldn’t live without mobile banking, or wearable fitness monitors for example, then we are unlikely to feel that we would have much influence over future developments. They pop up before we even realise we need them. As Douglas Coupland said in a recent article on the future of machine intelligence: “The internet is going to do to us whatever it is going to do, and the same end state will be achieved regardless of human will. Gulp.”

But when it comes to what it does for our lives, we are confronted with the miracles of technology at every turn. Each day some new development is announced to make our lives smoother, easier, faster, and more entertaining. So for a generation that has grown up being plugged into this technology, it may well feel like a no-brainer that it contributes to the kind of life they want to lead.
2.3 COLLECTIVE: BRAND IMPLICATIONS

The overall lack of empowerment in the collective elements explored above suggests that there is a great opportunity for brands to make a meaningful difference to young people’s lives.

One way to do so is to address the tension around political empowerment. Help young people to have the influence they want by changing the conversation from one about politics to one about social issues. This will increase their confidence around the subject and give them greater conviction to express their political opinions.

Given that Britain’s young citizens have an appetite to learn about politics, and we know that there’s a gap in their formal education, brands could step up and find ways to empower young people politically through informing them. Providing this is done with complete neutrality, politics could be opened up and made more relevant and accessible to a new generation of voters. Look at where they’re already making attempts to situate themselves within the political landscape – perhaps an app or online platform featuring short-form content and personal profiling might begin to address the political frustrations of this age group.

And finally, empower them by championing their political priorities on their behalf.

Technological advancement is another area where there is a tension that brands could help to release. Having so little influence over something so influential in their lives creates a crisis of empowerment. There is a great deal of innovation around teaching children to code from a very early age. Brands targeting a young adult demographic could look to create tools that help them get to grips with coding and hacking in a way that is relevant to their life stage and needs.
2.4 FUTURE: KEY POINTS

- The same things that empower respondents now are the things they anticipate contributing to their future; all personal elements with education and personal relationships contributing the most.

- Respondents do not demonstrate great confidence that they will actually achieve the life they really want to lead in future. This reflects reporting that their generation will be the first to fare worse than their parents.

2.4 FUTURE

Which of the following has the greatest impact in helping you to live the life you want to lead in the future?

The division between personal and collective persisted when we asked respondents which elements would most help them lead the life they want in the future. The things that they ranked highest were all personal.

Education is felt to have the greatest impact, with 72% ranking it within their top 3 most important factors and 41% ranking it as the most important. So not only is education one of the things that empowers them most in the present day, they recognise its long-term value too, which suggests a long-term, responsible approach to the future.
Personal relationships rank second, again mirroring respondents’ present day priorities. That they recognise the value of personal relationships in their future reflects the finding that good quality relationships promote wellbeing and help us achieve our goals. 

When asked how likely they feel it is that they will actually achieve that ideal future though, the response was a sobering 6.4 out of 10.

This middling figure could reflect the predictions that this will be the first generation to have a worse quality of life than their parents. In his State of the Nation speech last year, the Chair of the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission said: “urgent action is needed to prevent this generation of young people faring worse than their parents’ generation.”

When we probed the issue further in focus groups and asked respondents what would hold them back from living out their ideal future, they sagely cited such things as social inequality and socio-economic background, their health, and even themselves with reference to the need to push themselves out of their comfort zone in order to succeed.

On the flip side, the things that they felt would help them included international connectivity, life experience and opportunities created by the government and charities.

These responses reflect their grounded, no-nonsense nature and realistic, sensible outlook on life. They do not appear to be naïve, they do not have outlandish, immature expectations. Instead they seem prepared for a reality that's less than perfect.

Nonetheless, they clearly still feel a reliance on the creation of opportunities to help them succeed. Brands could take on some of the responsibility that our young respondents have designated to the government and charities.
IDENTITY
3. IDENTITY

For our inaugural Youth State report we have chosen to examine the subject of identity amongst this young audience. This section of the report seeks to really get under their skin and get to know them.

We have asked them about how they view themselves, what’s important to them and who they admire amongst other important elements of identity.

To investigate the theme of identity further, we invited film makers Asare Simms to make a short film exploring their interpretation of the theme. Please see the Youth State site to watch the film.

3.1 REPRESENTATION VS. REALITY: KEY POINTS

- Young people do not feel very empowered by politics – they have low levels of influence and feel fairly ambivalent if not outright negative about the impact it has on the life they want to lead.

- Young people do not feel accurately represented; they see themselves portrayed as disruptive, materialistic, vain and entirely consumed by technology and social media.

- In reality they describe themselves as serious, friendly and sociable, kind and caring and embracing of their youthfulness. They are also proud of their open-mindedness, embrace of all people and disregard for ‘the norm’.

- They are however acutely aware of the role and influence of the media on their sense of self by creating standards and ideals to adhere to.
On a scale of one to ten, how accurate do you think the world’s portrayal of people your age is? (MEAN)

According to our respondents, young people do not feel very accurately understood or represented. In fact they rate the accuracy of their portrayal as just 4.4 out of 10.

When we probed the issue further in focus groups they revealed that they feel they are represented as rebellious and disruptive.

“I think a lot of them think we’re really rebellious” - Siobhan, 18

A specific example of an inaccurate representation of their generation that they highlighted was a magazine page emblazoned with the message ‘Growing Up Is Giving Up, Stay Punk’.

And following the London riots they felt they were all unfairly tarred with the same brush given that the most of the anti-social behaviour was exhibited by a minority. Headlines such as ‘Riots were like ‘a rave’ and a chance for young people to get ‘free stuff” demonstrate precisely the sensationalist scapegoating and finger-pointing that occurred in the aftermath of the riots.

The reference to ‘free stuff’ illustrates another grievance that young people have with their representation; they believe that they are inaccurately portrayed as materialistic:

“They see us as people who need things to be happy”
-Khush, 17
They also feel that they are viewed as superficial, tech obsessed and addicted to social media.

“When we’re not on our phones we’re focussing on our image” - Michael, 16

This though, they acknowledge as partly true. They recognise that technology and social media are significant parts of their lives, and, as we will shortly see, has made them more focussed on their appearance.

“I do think that we all care about our appearances. I’m not going to deny that” - Siobhan, 18

However these characteristics are presented as more overblown and exaggerated than the reality.

Finally, our respondents said that their generation is portrayed as boundary-breakers, subverting social norms. Again they wouldn’t disagree completely with this assessment, but instead of seeing it as a negative attribute they consider themselves embracers of all people. They celebrate difference and accept each other for whoever they are regardless of how mainstream or ‘normal’ they are.

“It’s [image from a magazine] a bit niche, a bit weird, and portraying someone who doesn’t necessarily want to fit into social norms, and I think a lot more people are like this than are probably portrayed…. It’s a different expression of the self. [The media representation] is a bit homogenous” – Ryan, 20

This sentiment was summed up perfectly by Ed Sheeran in his speech at the 9th Annual American Institute for Stuttering Benefit Gala, when he encouraged children to “embrace your weirdness”.
So if the world’s representation of young people is not accurate, then what are they really like? When asked to describe themselves in a word, the responses were quite serious in tone. They consider themselves shy, determined, caring, honest and intelligent. This picture very much reflects the grounded, sensible outlook on life that they presented in the first half of this report; focusing heavily on education and making considered, mature statements about politics.
They do however balance out this seriousness with light-hearted adjectives such as fun and friendly. And this appears to be the side they present to others, as words like funny, fun, friendly, kind and bubbly dominate the way their friends would characterise them.
When selecting images that they felt accurately represented them, our respondents chose many that portrayed groups of young people spending time together, and emphasised the importance of being sociable. Social connections and spending time with friends is clearly an integral part of how they define themselves, particularly given the empowerment they derive from personal relationships.
Another trait that emerged is an authentic embrace of their childish side. For a group of young people perched on the brink of adulthood, this was a refreshing finding.

Far from rushing to leave their youth behind, they demonstrated a nostalgia for their childhood and an unabashed enjoyment of things that reconnect them with their early years.

“Even though we have our times when we act like adults, we still have our childish times as well” – Michael, 16
For instance, when asked what had excited, interested or impressed them over the past 6 months, many mentioned the Marvel film, Avengers: Age of Ultron. Comic books and comic book characters were also mentioned unprompted in conversation and were included in the collection of images selected to accurately represent the age group.

It may be that they feel greater permission to indulge in interests like this since ‘geek culture’ has grown into the mainstream. 

But the distinct Peter Pan mentality of this age group is evident in other examples too. Take for instance, a remix of the ‘Little Einsteins’ theme song, which was mentioned to us by one of our focus group participants. Little Einsteins is a Disney animated series for young children. However, in 2014 YouTuber 886Beatz uploaded a trap remix of the song, which garnered over 5.3 million views and 3,400 comments over the following month.

In general, young people appear to be much more sensitive and sensible than they feel they are portrayed to be. They are not as impulsive or extreme as we are led to believe, and they sincerely value their social relationships and enjoy good, clean fun.

However they are mature enough to have astutely pointed out that there’s not a clear divide between their view of themselves and the world’s portrayal of them – they are to some extent influenced by the media and how it suggests they should be:

“I think the industry has created [this image] and then people have just caught onto the idea and thought ‘I need to look as good as that’” – Alex, 20

It’s worth noting that young people are well aware of the role that brands and the media play in creating standards and ideals that are imposed upon them. Open communication with this audience about what it is they actually want to see might avoid backlash when they inevitably tire of seeing inaccurate representations of themselves.
3.2 FIRST IMPRESSIONS: KEY POINTS

- Our respondents believe that their first impression is largely based on both personality and looks, yet they want it to be based on personality alone.

- When examining results by gender, it becomes clear that females feel that they are more likely to be judged on their appearance than their male counterparts. This is most exaggerated amongst younger females.

- Almost half of our sample admit to editing their social media profiles to present the best possible version of themselves.

- Yet this generation’s heavy use of platforms that reduce user profiles down to superficial features is at odds with their desire to be assessed based on their personality.
3.2 FIRST IMPRESSIONS

What do you think people’s first impression of you is based on?

Our true identities may not always be conveyed in a first impression.
So we asked our respondents what they think people’s first impression of them is based on, and overall they selected personality, though this is closely followed by looks.

What do you think people’s first impression of you is based on?
It is interesting to note that young men feel more confident that they are judged primarily by personality than young women. Personality has an 11% lead over looks for males, whereas amongst female respondents looks are rated 1% higher than personality, placing the two virtually neck and neck.*

Women also feel first impressions of themselves are based on the way they dress 8% more than men do.* This is another superficial, looks-based feature, adding weight to the argument that women feel significantly more judged by their appearance than personality compared to their male peers.

*What do you think people’s first impression of you is based on?

This difference is even more pronounced for younger females. The 16-19 year olds feel that they are judged primarily by looks not personality.*

This trend rebalances slightly amongst 20-24 year olds. By their early 20s young women feel that their first impressions are based on personality 7% more than their looks.*

The difference may therefore be down to the insecurity of youth; an inevitability of adolescence.

Nonetheless, roughly a fifth of both age groups feel that it is the way they dress that determines people’s first impression of them, so even increased maturity doesn’t completely eliminate the gender imbalance in the role of appearance in first impressions.

“I think it’s really bad how women especially get seen as sexualised objects” – Siobhan, 18

It seems that there is a clear role for brands here in diminishing the forces that cause girls to feel so disproportionately judged by their appearance. Create alternative content that sends the opposite message and be consistent in ensuring your brand does not place greater emphasis on the physical appearance of women than that of men.

So first impressions may be out of our control, but when we asked respondents what they most want to be judged by, personality still comes out on top but by a much more significant margin, taking 71% of the vote.
In groups, our respondents told us this was a no-brainer; they described personality as ‘the most ‘you’ part of you’. Personality is what people are attracted to, the part they make friends with.

“How could you be friends with an outfit?” – Artem, 20

Young women actually want to be judged by personality 8% more than their male counterparts.* Perhaps this is because, as we have seen, they feel less convinced that this is actually the case for them.

Despite such a clear call to be judged by their true character, young people know that life isn’t so black and white. They spoke about how people use their appearance to convey their personality, for instance through the clothes they wear.

And what’s more, everyone judges others by their appearance whether they mean to or not.

“I think we all want to be based on personality, but we have eyes to see. ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’, but everybody does, instinctively” – Alex, 20

Imagine you met someone for the first time. What would you most like their first impression to be based on?

In fact they seem to be bombarded by the message that they will be judged by their appearance whatever happens.

“People are so into their looks and appearance because of what they’ve been told, that it’s appearance before personality now for our generation” – Beatrice, 19

Indeed they even described how they are warned by careers advisors that they will be judged based on their appearance in interviews.

Once again, they also described an awareness of the role of the media in creating and perpetuating this emphasis on looks. It has become embedded in our cultural sub-conscious.

“Because of the media, especially girls, we’re expected to have certain things and if we don’t have it, then automatically our personality is not going to be good, we’re not going to be accepted” – Beatrice, 19

They are clearly quite savvy when it comes to brands and the media. Young adults are well aware of the responsibility that these organisations ought to take. So strive to live up to those expectations rather than peddling the same, tired old cultural messages about the value placed on physical attractiveness.
To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

I’m sick of people creating a perfect image of their lives online - it’s a lie.

I edit my online profiles to some extent in order to present the best possible image of myself.

I don’t like the pressure social media has put on me to present myself a certain way

Social media has made me more vain

There is an interesting tension at play here. On the one hand, young people don’t want to be so heavily judged by their appearance and other superficial traits, yet this is contradicted by their use of social media which instantly reduces people to their appearance.

Take Instagram, which is just one long feed of images of your life, or Tinder, which reduces a potential partner down to just five photos.

And this age group is heavily engaged with social media; 16-24 year old social media users spend an average of an hour and a half a day on this activity.

This results in a fascinating paradox: on the one hand 64% agree that they are sick of people creating the perfect image of their lives online.

“I think it’s got to the point where if I see someone really attractive in a picture, I’ll be like ‘Oh that’s probably what they don’t look like in real life’” - Abigail, 16

Yet almost half admit to engaging in the exact practice themselves: 44% edit their online profiles to some extent in order to present the best possible image of themselves.

And 34% would go so far as to agree that social media has actually made them more vain.

Is social media therefore creating an online community of hypocrites?
They are well aware of the downsides of all this though; 52% agree that they don’t like these pressures that social media has put on them. In fact these pressures can develop into something much more sinister in certain cases.

ChildLine received more than 10,500 calls and online inquiries for food and weight related anxiety last year, and Sue Minto, head of the charity, has said that “we also know the 24/7 nature of social media places huge pressures on our children and young people which in turn can lead to significant emotional issues”. 34

Despite these detrimental effects, young people are unwilling to extricate themselves from the online community.

“I just feel like if I delete my Facebook profile, I’ll be missing out on.... something.” – Michael, 16

Hence they find themselves in a bind – they are well aware of the negative effects of social media, but are unable to escape them. They are trapped in an uncomfortable reality, far from blissfully unaware.

For brands keen to find an acceptable way to interact on social media, there could be an opportunity here. Why not aim to counter the inherent pressures of social media with content that acknowledges or even pokes fun at the falsity of online profiles, that encourages and celebrates being your true self?

For inspiration look at the examples of beauty bloggers who have revealed their ‘real’ faces recently. For instance, Em Ford, of the My Pale Skin blog, posted pictures of herself wearing no make-up “to point out the “unrealistic expectations” social media places on women”. 35

### 3.3 Admiration of Others:

**Key Points**

- Respondents consider intelligence and a sense of humour most important in other people.

- This is reinforced by both traits also appearing in the top five most admired qualities in other people. A strong sense of self is also considered highly admirable. Also featuring in the top 5 are kindness and being a supportive friend, re-iterating the importance of personal relationships.

- The least admirable qualities they cite are all superficial and have nothing to do with integrity of character. Looks, money and popularity do nothing to draw admiration for these young people.

- The people they admire are largely those they know and are close to; family, friends, teachers and colleagues, not celebrities.

- Those celebrities that are mentioned have substance and are admired for sincere and meaningful achievements such as humanitarian activity and generosity.

- The people they dislike are vacuous, provocative, express extreme opinions and exhibit extreme behaviours so could be seen as bad role models.
3.3 ADMIRATION OF OTHERS

What do you consider to be the MOST important things about people?

Having discussed at length how they see and present themselves, we then asked our respondents for their thoughts on other people, as this offers an equally interesting insight into who these young people really are.

Intelligence and a sense of humour are the top two most important qualities in others by a significant margin.

They are almost equally weighted in importance, with only a 3% difference in the number of people who ranked them within their top 3 most important qualities. And although the results fall slightly in favour of intelligence overall, 9% more people ranked a sense of humour as most important, than intelligence.

The fact that intelligence tops the charts here reiterates our respondents’ emphasis on the importance of education that we saw earlier in the report.

Perhaps the value placed on intelligence in others explains why they consider their education to be so empowering in the first place; if intelligence is an important quality in others, then education may be empowering as it enables them to become the kind of person they admire.

Meanwhile, the importance of a sense of humour reflects the way our respondents have characterised themselves. We have already seen a tendency not to take oneself too seriously – they describe themselves as ‘fun’ and ‘funny’.

Political values is the third most important quality according to our respondents. Demonstrating political values suggests having an opinion on key social issues, which reflects what we have already seen they are engaged with.

Important qualities in other people don’t necessarily translate directly to what is considered important in brands, but it’s a good place to start when trying to build meaningful and authentic connections with this audience.

So given what we see here, brands should not take themselves too seriously; demonstrate a sense of humour, but an intelligent one. Be smart, not slapstick. And reflect their appreciation for more serious subjects such as political issues by balancing humour with the ability to engage in more meaningful conversations too.
The characteristics that are admired in others certainly overlap with what is considered important. For instance, a sense of humour is cited as most admired by almost half of respondents. Authenticity is also considered deeply admirable by over a third. We have already seen evidence of this mentality in their embrace of the unconventional, their appreciation for those who are different and who have a strong sense of self. Indeed, the phrase ‘Just Do You’ has become a common phrase in youth vernacular. Pop princess Taylor Swift used the phrase in an interview with Vogue last November36, whilst teen sweetheart Selena Gomez incorporated the message into her We Day speech in Vancouver: “So just do you, be true to yourself, love yourself, have confidence in yourself, and everything will be fine.”

Also included in the top five most admired qualities, selected by over a quarter of respondents respectively, are kindness and being a supportive friend. Apart from being heart-warming results, the selection of these two characteristics is once again indicative of the importance of friendship that has been evidenced throughout this report.

Airbnb, a brand that has successfully tapped into youth culture through the sharing economy, has once again demonstrated its credentials in the youth market by incorporating these very values into its latest advertising campaign.

The central advert contemplates the fundamental kindness of man38, and of it Airbnb say: “Airbnb believes that people can and should feel like they belong anywhere in the world. That feeling is possible because of the human kindness found in our community--because of hosts who were once strangers, who welcome us no matter how far we are from home. Go and see just how kind this world can be.”

It is a great example of how to subtly indicate an empathetic understanding of your audience, but what are the messages to steer clear of when trying to engage young consumers?
The qualities they least admire are all superficial: looks, wealth, popularity and clothes, none of these things are considered remotely admirable; none were selected by more than 6% of respondents.

It is interesting to note that the number of friends a person has, on or offline, is immaterial. Given that they admire kindness and being a supportive friend, it is the quality not quantity of friendships that is clearly important to these young people.

This generation has grown up in austerity, so it is perhaps unsurprising that they value meaningful, human traits and attribute little importance to material qualities. Brands would do well to bear this in mind, especially when promoting material goods.
So now we know what they admire, but who specifically wins their admiration? Based on the responses on the left, we can see that they predominantly admire ‘real’ people; family members and friends, the cast of their day to day lives, with Mums taking centre stage.

“My Mum - because I know her and I know her struggles, the things she’s had to give up” - Beatrice, 19
Indeed, 73% agree that they find real people more inspiring than celebrities. Once again this highlights those personal relationships that are so empowering, but also suggests that the celebrity bubble has burst.

That said, there are a few famous names amongst the parents, siblings and grandparents. And it seems that the criteria for their inclusion is their meaningful actions. Emma Watson has helped to promote the agenda of fourth wave feminism in her role as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador. Taylor Swift is known for her acts of generosity on a very personal level, for instance she donated $50,000 to a young fan battling cancer, and in another case helped a fan to pay off her student loans. Meanwhile Bill Gates is renowned as one of the world’s greatest philanthropists.

In fact, a massive 89% agree that they have more respect for those who have achieved success by doing something meaningful.

One of our respondents said of Emma Watson:

“She’s someone that I aspire to be like” - Abigail, 16

There has been much discussion about the importance of brand purpose over the past year. Based on the people our respondents admire, it would seem like a prudent move to appeal to the next generation of consumers. But purpose for purpose’s sake will not wash with this audience. As Adjust Your Set’s own Nick Timon writes, “purpose is built on beliefs and beliefs are something that exist deep in your corporate DNA, they’re part of what you stand for and why you exist in the first place.” Emma Watson fights for feminism because she defines herself as a feminist. Brands must find their equivalent battle; a cause that sits at the core of their being.

Jennifer Lawrence was another celebrity mentioned by our respondents. Looking at the qualities they admire in others, she seems like the perfect fit for this generation. She is true to herself and strives to remain grounded and normal; for example she bought a sofa from Ikea. And she has infamously tripped twice at awards ceremonies. Unlike so many untouchable Hollywood stars she is not perfect and this makes her relatable and authentic.

Humility is therefore another quality that brands could try to embody. Nobody and no brand is perfect, but it’s how you handle mistakes, transgressions and imperfections that counts.
The people in this world that our young respondents dislike are as revealing about their identities as those they admire.

What is immediately noticeable is that there is a much smaller cast of villains than heroes, suggesting that respondents are in greater agreement over who they dislike. Given the timing of this research (shortly after the general election), David Cameron makes what could be considered an inevitable appearance on this list. Young people have historically been more left-leaning than older voters. And even with reports of a higher number of young Tory voters in this election, it is considered a crime against one’s generation to admit to having helped Cameron back into power.\(^45\)

Cameron aside though, the rest are extremists and trouble makers. Katie Hopkins has built her career on making provocative comments that enrage the moderate middle. Nigel Farage represents a party which arguably sits further from the centre than any of the other major parties in the election. And Justin Bieber embodies a kind of spoilt rock and roll hedonism that is jarringly out of place amongst such a conscientious generation.

That these three appear to be so disliked suggests that the youth of Britain shun extremity; they are considered and sensible.
The inclusion of Kim Kardashian is particularly interesting. The Kardashians provoked a great deal of discussion in our focus groups – they are seen to be poor role models, their reasons for fame are objectionable and they have a negative impact on girls’ self-esteem.

They are certainly transparent about their lives, posting constantly on Instagram and seemingly holding little back in their hit reality TV show. Kim even posted pictures of her face mid-contouring, demonstrating the lengths she goes to to sculpt that perfect look.

But the mere fact that they promote such an artificial standard of beauty is irresponsible and objectionable.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Celebrities who portray a perfect image and show no flaws are bad role models

In fact, 52% agree that celebrities who portray a perfect image and show no flaws are bad role models. The flipside of that figure though is that 48% are either ambivalent or disagree. Once again, this hints at the declining relevance of celebrity. Perhaps people (well, almost half of them at least) simply don’t care what the glitterati do one way or another. Have they simply become zoo animals for us to examine with perverse intrigue? That would certainly explain why four of the five Kardashian/Jenner sisters are amongst the top ten most followed Instagram accounts.

The world appears to have a morbid fascination with these women. Are they the celebrities that young people love to hate? Perhaps Kim and her sisters are like sugary snacks – you know they’re bad for you and you hate them for it, but there’s something strangely addictive about them.

Brands take heed from this judgement – sensationalism is not the route to achieving long-term and meaningful relationships with consumers. Instead increase your connection with reality; be open about flaws and don’t try to promote an unachievable dream.

Brands that want to enjoy success amongst this generation should aim to characterise themselves more as a Jennifer Lawrence or an Emma Watson, rather than be the Kardashian of the marketing world.

But also put celebrities aside altogether and focus on real life stories instead of trying to beguile consumers with tales of fame and fortune. It simply isn’t aspirational any more.
3.4 VALUES: KEY POINTS

• The values that this age group have selected as most important to them underline their sensible and sensitive nature.

• Happiness is most important to them; reflective of their emphasis on experiential fulfillment rather than the pursuit of material wealth.

• Success is also important, but success can be measured in how rich and experience-filled your life is, especially given the use of social media to present an edited highlight reel of life.

• Interpersonal values such as trust, honesty, respect and kindness also feature in the top ten values.

3.4 VALUES

Which of the following are the THREE words that are most important to you?

To complete our picture of the identity of today’s 16-24 year olds, we quizzed them on their values. Their responses tie up a lot of the threads that weave throughout this report. Their highest ranking values paint a picture of a caring, sensible, considered and wholesome cohort.

For instance, happiness is the most important value according to over half of our respondents. According to philosopher and happiness consultant Michael Plant, this could be for a number of reasons.
Michael Plant is interested in happiness at the intersection of philosophy, psychology and behavioural economics. He is currently working on Hippo, an app that uses data tracking to create personalised, evidence-based advice on how to change what you do and think in order to be happier. He previously launched consulting firm System One, which advised businesses how make their employees happier, and has worked as a speechwriter and researcher to a senior Government minister. He speaks, writers, coaches and consults on happiness.

Michael has a first in philosophy from St Andrews, a master’s from LSE and starts a doctorate at Oxford in October on happiness.

First, the desire for happiness is not new – Aristotle and Plato discussed ‘the good life’ – and we still disagree over what it is: it could denote having pleasant, meaningful experiences, getting what you want, or achieving certain goals. Plant notes it’s therefore almost surprising that not everyone selected ‘happiness’ as each individual could interpret the word as representing whatever it is they value in life.

Plant points out that whilst we would need more information to know how this age group’s definition of a good life differs from previous generations, it is almost certainly true is that young people have different expectations about what they want; different criteria for that good life. Plant argues that our experiences of happiness are determined by how we feel about what we pay attention to.

Therefore, if something feels unachievable, we withdraw attention from it and focus on something more within our reach. As has already been discussed, this generation is the first that may have a worse quality of life than their parents, and are certainly unlikely to achieve the same levels of material wealth. Indeed, one study found that young people would need to save £33 a day for the next 30 years to be as wealthy as their parents.47
As Plant says: “young people don’t expect to be wealthier than their parents, so with that lack of expectation there isn’t a focus on becoming wealthy”. It is therefore possible that they have refocused on happiness explicitly because material success seems less achievable for them than it did for their parents.

Technology and all the convenience it delivers means that this generation, who have grown up with technology embedded firmly in their everyday existence, are used to instant, rather than delayed, gratification. Yet Plant points out that this can be seen as a virtue; they are not prepared to have their time wasted on things that don’t make them happy and this can be a valuable catalyst of social change.

“What’s the point of doing something if you’re not happy?” Siobhan, 18

What’s more, Plant argues, technology has also profoundly changed how young people evaluate their lives. Because we share so much online and compete to present the best possible version of ourselves, Plant explains that there is a tendency to think of our lives as something like a CV of edited and important highlights.

He draws an analogy with surfing “life is a bit like surfing. Sometimes we’re on the surfboard, most of the time we’re just in the water. It’s the time on the board we focus on”. The rise of social media and the ensuing need to compete through experiences means that people are presenting an edited compilation of surfboard moments.

Michael Plant’s insights about ‘CV lives’ also pertains to the presence of success within the top five values. It could be that this generation has just the same urge to be successful and stand out from their peers as previous generations. The difference is this generation, largely because of tech and their online lives, have a different, less material, more experiential idea of success from their parents. As he says: “it might be that we crave success just as much as ever, but the way we live our lives now, success looks more like happiness and that’s probably a good thing”.

If this is the case, then happiness and success may be intertwined and inseparable for this generation.

**Which of the following are the THREE words that are most important to you?**

There is a notable gender difference in the results for equality, set against the socio-cultural back-drop of fourth wave feminism.

Examples of this movement include Cameron, as part of his pledge to close the pay gap within a generation, forcing large companies to publish their pay gap figures. The de-gendering of toys is setting the stage for a more equal future with the likes of GoldieBlox, and Target getting rid of gender-based labelling in its toy aisles. Meanwhile the debate about sexism in Hollywood rages on, and marketing is reflecting the Zeitgeist back at us with ads such as Always ‘Like a Girl’.

This wave of feminist activity has largely been powered by the internet, and the power it gives to millions of voices. The Everyday Sexism Project is a great example of this. Young women are at the core of driving this movement, using online tools to promote their own, new frontier of feminism. So it is not surprising that equality should be of greater importance to girls than boys in our sample.
Overall though, the top ten list is dominated by highly interpersonal and gentle values: love, respect, trust, honesty and kindness – once again these underline the emphasis on personal relationships that characterises this group. They are evidently real believers in mutual respect and taking care of one another.

And finally, selected by 14% of respondents, intelligence makes another appearance. Education empowers, intelligence is admirable, and evidently it is a value to live by too.

So the picture painted of this generation according to their values is one of young people who seem to have their priorities in order. If nothing else they will be guided by a sound set of profoundly good values.

These values, it could be argued, are the bare minimum, the core rules of engagement for brands reaching out to this age group. Coca-Cola have capitalised on this insight since 2009 with their ‘Open Happiness’ campaign. Although the brand is reportedly now looking to move on to a new campaign idea, the positioning has been successful, winning many awards including over sixty Cannes Lions.

So follow in Coca-Cola’s footsteps and use emotion in your messaging to appeal to the core values of this demographic.

But ultimately, reflect their values by simply behaving like a decent human being and this will ensure some solid foundations.
4. CONCLUSIONS

A clear theme has emerged from all the findings in this research. If there is one thing to take away from our report it is this: treat this audience with respect and appreciate them for the impressive young adults that they are.

Don’t patronise, listen. Don’t mislead, be honest. Don’t pressure them, empower them.

Ultimately it comes down to demonstrating basic humanity and decency. For a generation who have encountered and continue to face challenges, be it a paucity of job prospects or the strain of social media, they know what’s important and want to be treated right. Their emphasis on qualities like authenticity and a sense of humour point directly to the integrity that they will appreciate in their dealings with brands.

Below we have outlined the specific ways that brand can act on the major findings from the report.

01. FAMILY FIRST

Personal relationships are deeply empowering area of young people’s lives. The importance of friends and especially family came up consistently throughout our research. Mocking parents and encouraging teenage rebellion won’t fly with this generation. Many are reliant on their parents for much longer than previous generations were, and there is a sense of respect and appreciation that goes hand in hand with this shift.

Think back to Apple’s ‘Misunderstood’ Christmas advert in 2013, featuring a teenage boy who creates a film of his family’s Christmas together on his iPhone. Or Comptoir des Cottoniers’ iconic Mother Daughter print campaign, resurrected this year.

Put messages of familial solidarity and celebrations of parents such as these front and centre in your communications with young people. Think also about creating content, events or products that bring families together, enabling young people to increase the time spent benefitting from these empowering personal relationships.

02. FIX UP, ACT SMART

Of those areas within their personal sphere, education is one of the most empowering. Not only do young people feel empowered in and by education, they recognise its value in empowering them in future. Undoubtedly, given the bleak employment landscape that this generation has graduated into, this emphasis on education is partly seen as a means to finding a good job. But our respondents also find intelligence an admirable quality, and so education plays an important role in helping them to become the kind of person they look up to.

Brands can take note from this finding: don’t dumb down. Engage young consumers on an intellectual level that not only pays homage to their respect for education, but demonstrates the kind of intelligence that they admire and aspire to. Communicate with them as intelligent adults, pay them the respect of crafting content that challenges and inspires them, sparks debate and furthers their education outside the classroom.
Promoting edification and continuous learning, even outside the bounds of formal schooling, is likely to strike a chord with a generation who derive a sense of empowerment from education.

03. MAKE POLITICS PERSONAL

We know that young people derive more empowerment from the personal elements of their lives; those things that are more immediately within their control, than the wider social issues that affect us all.

Brands therefore have an opportunity to help empower young consumers in those collective areas, give them greater agency to make a difference at society level, especially in politics where we know that they want to have greater influence. For instance, promote political activity; encourage or facilitate voting. Create safe spaces for political discussion where young citizens feel that their opinions are valid and have the confidence to express them. Let them know that their voices are being heard by acting on their behalf – listen to what they are calling for and champion their political agenda through brand and corporate activity. These kinds of actions will help to empower young people politically, as much as they are in the personal areas of their lives.

04. GET PLugged IN

Technology presents a conundrum of empowerment – it plays an important role in young people’s lives, but they have very little influence over the development of the sector.

Brands might consider enabling consumers to become a part of the process, rather than simply throwing new devices, apps and online services at them. Build on the maker movement and seek their feedback and hands on input when it comes to developing devices and online services. Not only will this empower young adults to understand the nuts and bolts of tech advancement rather than simply being passive consumers, but as digital natives they will make a valuable contribution.

For brands that are not directly involved in technological development, there are other ways to empower young people in this area. For instance, offering coding or programming courses to young customers could make a big difference. It would be simple to make this kind of knowledge available through online content.

05. TURN DOWN THE BEAUTY PRESSURE COOKER

It’s abundantly clear that young people are all too aware of the effects that media and marketing have on them. In conversation with our focus group participants, there was much discussion about the negative role that these industries have in terms of setting unrealistic standards and creating pressures on appearance. We have seen that this is an open-minded group of young people who celebrate diversity and self-expression. Conformity is irrelevant to them.

So stop trying to promote the ultimate aspirational lifestyle. Too many brands are still getting called out for featuring super skinny mannequins and idealising unrepresentative body types. Help to alleviate some
of the image-based pressure that young people face instead of contributing to it: cast a wide variety of faces in your communications, seek to flood the landscape with images of every shape, size and colour to overcome the monotony of what is currently exhibited. Brands that celebrate their customers for who-ever they are will be much more popular than those that try and peddle the same old vision of beauty and success. Take this sentiment a step further and consciously create content that focuses on attributes beyond looks. For example, select brand representatives for intellectual, sporting, or political achievements instead of a good bone structure.

06.

DITCH CELEBS

The era of blind celebrity worship seems to be drawing to a close.

So think twice before jumping to celebrity endorsement as a means of appealing to young consumers. It’s much more valuable to think about the qualities you’re trying to associate the brand with; it may be that there’s a much more effective way to express those characteristics than defaulting to a famous face. How about creating real-life stories that celebrate those qualities amongst more relatable people? Look to seek out community heroes who have an inspiring story that young consumers will admire and relate to.

However, if a celebrity association is the right fit, be discerning in your selection: whilst having an ‘edge’ can be a good thing depending on the brand, avoid anyone too extreme, who may have an unsavoury or nefarious reputation, or anyone who might be considered vacuous. Young people will respond better to those who have achieved their recognition through meaningful hard work and who make good role-models.

07.

BE YOURSELF...

It may be tempting to re-invent yourself to fit the tastes of young consumers, but this is a sure way to turn them off your brand. Authenticity is hugely important to them and they admire those with a strong sense of self.

You are more likely to get respect from this audience by being yourself, sticking to your core purpose and authentic brand DNA. Take Patagonia for example; the outdoor clothing brand has remained true to its original identity over the years, and committed to its purpose: ‘Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.’ Their authenticity has paid off with great popularity amongst Millennial consumers. So be sure of your purpose before embarking on targeting this audience. Then make sure that your communications are single minded and clear to ensure that you are clearly associated with that message. This will be much more effective than attempting to attach your brand to every flavour of the week.

08.

...BUT DON’T TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY

Authenticity is important, but beware of tipping over into overly sincere territories. Nobody likes a bore who can’t have a laugh. A sense of humour is not just admirable but important according to our respondents.
So reflect this lighthearted tendency in your interactions with them. In particular, don’t be too precious about brand image. Tesco Mobile’s epic Twitter conversation a couple of years ago developed from a flippant insult to the brand, but the Tesco Mobile social media team turned it into a viral success instead by demonstrating self-deprecating humour. Social media presence is both important and a great opportunity to demonstrate a humorous, human side. Conduct conversations as any person would; interact in a natural and lighthearted way and be prepared to react flexibly to events, as in the Tesco example. Anthropologist Kate Fox speaks of ‘the importance of not being earnest’ which perfectly sums up this principle.

09.

**SPREAD A LITTLE HAPPINESS**

Experiences rule for this generation. They’re unlikely to achieve the same levels of material wealth as their parents, and so have focused on realising happiness instead.

Help them to build a fulfilling life based on joyous experiences that they can cherish. Host events, give competition winners epic holidays and position products as tools for achieving an experience-rich lifestyle. For example, a camera captures incredible once-in-a-lifetime moments, a savings account helps you achieve that round the world trip you always dreamed of. Think about how your offering enhances their experience of life.

But remember: this age group is accustomed to immediacy. If a product or brand isn’t making them happy, they won’t wait around for it to improve – so make sure to get it right first time.

10.

**REASON REIGNS**

This point cropped up again and again throughout our findings: young people are not rebels without a cause. They are not tearaways mindlessly destroying their health, future and surroundings. Instead we have encountered a group of conscientious, considered young adults who appreciate fun and a good time, but also think about the long-term and place value on the things that will help them along in life. Indeed, think-tank Demos has found that 66% of 16-24 year olds do not consider alcohol important to their social lives, and 19% don’t drink at all. Hardly a generation of out-of-control young hedonists. Yet young people feel they are too often labeled as trouble-makers. As we have seen, this does not correlate with how they see themselves at all.

So don’t make the mistake of patronising them based on the hangover of previous generations. Forget everything you thought you knew about ‘youth’ and appreciate these people for the sensible young adults that they are. Communicate with them in a meaningful and mature fashion, engage with them on serious subjects and genuinely listen to what they have to say instead of dismissing it as the folly of youth.

Open forums to demonstrate your dedication to a two-way dialogue. Launch initiatives that support the causes they believe in. Develop tools, products and services that empower young people to build the future they want. And above all make sure that you don’t misrepresent them as destructive, rebellious and vain. Nothing could be further from the truth.
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5. NOTES

* Difference is not statistically significant

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