
Global perspectives on online anonymity

Age trends in the use of anonymity online and its impact on human behaviour and freedom of expression



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Youth IGF Project – Childnet International



Global perspectives on online anonymity



Over 1,300 people from across 68 countries took part in the Youth IGF Project survey. This survey was designed by a group of young people aged 15-17 years to help them explore global attitudes and experiences of online anonymity.

Childnet International created the Youth IGF Project to bring the voice of youth to the Internet Governance Forum. This year, five young people from the UK aged 15-17 years are attending the 2013 IGF to chair their own workshop on online anonymity. The issue of anonymity emerged in discussions at the 2012 IGF, where the young people chaired a workshop about social media, young people and freedom of expression. The youth team concluded that online anonymity is something that distinguishes online from offline communication, and that it can be empowering and give people a voice, but it can facilitate nasty and cruel interactions because of the perceived lack of accountability. This survey was created by the youth team to help them explore global attitudes and experiences of online anonymity. Respondents were aged 13 years and over, and age trends are explored in the report. This is a participatory exercise to give more people a voice on the issue, and the findings should not be taken as globally representative.

Summary

- **Communicating anonymously is a common online activity.** Two-thirds of respondents said they had communicated online without revealing their identity in the last year.
- **People use a range of methods to communicate anonymously online.** The most common methods of anonymous online communication were leaving an anonymous comment (51%) and using a service that you don't have to register for (40%).
- **The main reason why people choose to be anonymous online is to protect personal information.** 65% of respondents selected this reason and it was the most common reason for being anonymous across all age groups.
- **Many people feel they can express themselves more freely if they are anonymous.** 59% of respondents said they are more likely to say what they want online if they are anonymous.
- **This can sometimes result in anonymous users being abusive.** 71% felt that people are nastier if they are anonymous on the internet, 37% said they had received abuse from an anonymous user on the internet, and 25% thought they themselves might be nastier if they were anonymous on the internet.
- **Many people have seen anonymity online being used for negative reasons.** 70% of respondents said they had seen online anonymity being used for bad reasons, including bullying, hate speech, sexual harassment, identity theft and the spreading of false information and rumours.
- **However, many also had seen anonymity being used for positive reasons.** 53% of respondents said they had seen online anonymity being used for good reasons, including for seeking help and advice about potentially embarrassing, sensitive or taboo subjects; saying compliments that you might feel embarrassed to say otherwise; for protecting privacy; for speaking your mind without being judged or facing a backlash; as well as criticising governments, corporates or speaking about controversial subjects.
- **On balance, the majority felt that it is important that we allow people to be anonymous if they want.** 86% said it was important that people are allowed to be anonymous online.

Methodology

The survey was designed by young people aged 15-17 years who are part of the Youth IGF Project, and Childnet's policy team provided guidance about creating effective survey questions. The survey was available online using SurveyMonkey and was open between 19 August and 30 September 2013.

Closed questions were used to aggregate answers for statistical purposes, yielding numerical findings to provide percentages. Open questions were also included to allow respondents to express themselves and elaborate on the answers provided. Direct quotes are included in this report and therefore they may include spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. None of the questions were mandatory and could be skipped by respondents.

The survey was promoted to Childnet's international contacts, and partners helped to provide translated guides in Arabic, Brazilian Portuguese, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, German and Spanish.

Sample

1,382 people took part in the survey. 66% of respondents were female (N=913) and 34% were male (N=468). 22% of respondents were 13-15 years (N=304), 28% were 16-18 years (N=390), 25% were 19-25 years (N=347), 15% were 26-35 years old (N=208) and 10% were over 36 years old (N=132).

There were responses across 68 countries - Afghanistan, Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Columbia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guyana, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Peru, the Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay and Yemen. We saw the highest number of responses from Finland, the UK, China, Mexico and India.

We provide analyses by age, but the results should be taken as indicative only, as they are not globally representative. We do not provide analyses by region, because of small sample sizes and age variations across regions.

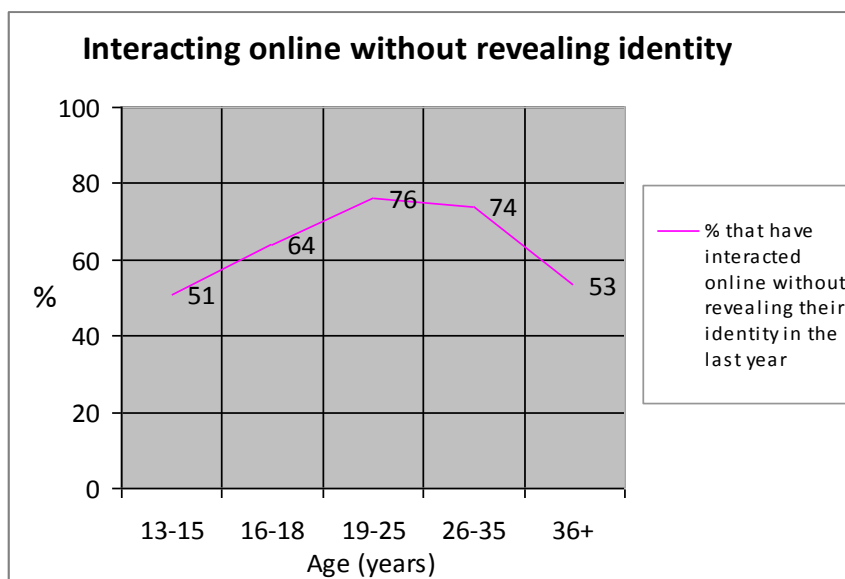
Results

Communicating anonymously is a common online activity

Almost two-thirds (65%) of the respondents said they had interacted online without revealing their identity in the last year. 29% said they had not, while 6% said they didn't know. We can see that use of anonymous services peaks among people in their twenties.

> **Graph 1:** Age trends in interacting anonymously

Base: 1,178 respondents that answered the question 'In the last year, have you interacted online without revealing your identity?' Multiple Choice (Single Answer)



People use a range of methods to communicate anonymously online

The most common methods of anonymous online communication were leaving an anonymous comment (51%) and using a service that you don't have to register for (40%).

The 19-25 and 26-35 age groups show the highest take up across the majority of these methods of anonymous communication, consistent with the fact that these age groups are more likely to use anonymous services online. However, there are some methods of anonymous communication that show a peak in use at a comparatively younger or older age. For example, use of anonymous chat services peaks amongst the 16-25 age group, while using an account with a name that is not their own shows a peak in use amongst the 26+ age group.

Table 1: Age trends in methods of anonymous communication

How did you communicate anonymously?	13-15 years	16-18 years	19-25 years	26-35 years	36+ years	Total
Left an anonymous comment	46%	52%	56%	57%	35%	51%
Used an account with a name that is not my own (eg. fake name on Facebook, Twitter name like @not_my_name)	33%	27%	40%	43%	40%	36%
Used a service that I didn't have to register for (eg. anonymous message board)	28%	41%	47%	46%	33%	40%
Created a blog or website that doesn't show my identity	15%	19%	29%	29%	28%	22%
Used a service that allowed me to chat anonymously with strangers (eg. anonymous video chat or chatting while gaming)	24%	40%	43%	28%	9%	33%
Other	13%	14%	11%	9%	14%	12%

Base: 950 respondents that answered the question 'If yes, how did you do this?' Multiple Choice (Multiple Answers).

We provided a free entry box where people could tell us more about how they communicate anonymously. Among the 13-15 age group we saw comments that mentioned services like Ask.fm, Instagram, Snapchat, Bin Weevils, Twitter and Omegle - as well as online games, mobile apps and forums. Some respondents referenced how they use display names and don't share much personal information.

"I only put my first name on posts and don't publicly display personal details i.e. Phone number etc" - **Male, UK (13-15 yrs)**

Among the 16-18 age group, the sites and services mentioned were Tumblr, Chatroulette, Xbox LIVE, Ask.fm, Steam, YouTube, Omegle, Talkd and League of Legends – as well as services such as Tor, and web browsing behind VPNs. Several respondents spoke about having an 'internet identity' which may be anonymous to unknown users, with no personally identifying information, but this identity may be known to their friends.

"i have accounts with names that are not mine to chat with other fans of the things i like and to send messages to my idols, i also have talked with people i dont know just to have fun without revealing my identity" - **Female, Mexico (16-18 yrs)**

"I usually register into new social medias/websites/services with same username that i use in most places. It is my Internet identity. However, some websites do reveal my first or full name and i have made finding my real name quite easy on purpose(to be open). I also use same username in most places to make it easier for my friends on one network to find me on others too." - **Male, Finland (16-18 yrs)**

The 19-25 age group mentioned services like YouTube, Omegle, IRC services, 4chan, Steam, Chatous, Gendou, as well as commenting on articles and using online games and anonymous message boards.

“As a member of the LGBT community I use the internet as a way to communicate with other LGBT people across the world without revealing my sexuality to people I know” - **Female, UK (19-25yrs)**

“Sometimes I even use software which allow me to hide my IP and hence the geographical identity.” - **Male, India (19-25 yrs)**

The 26-35 and 36+ age groups mentioned Ebay, personal blogs, Twitter, commenting on blogs and articles, as well as communicating online with a corporate identity. In addition, this age group mention services like Tor and VPNs.

“I have a stable, consistent internet pseudonym that I use on several social networking sites, primarily Dreamwidth, Livejournal and Twitter. I have used this same pseudonym for over ten years. I would not like to use my full "real" name online because I don't want to be easily searchable by, for example, people I interact with professionally. However, I do not consider my online identity less real than my legal name - it is a pseudonym, not a "fake" name - and I have many friends whom I first met under my online identity who I have met face to face. Under my online pseudonym, I have a well-established reputation, and I certainly consider myself accountable for the things I say under that name. That name is me, perhaps more so than my legal name. I am not anonymous when I use that name, I am a person who is known by that name.” - **Female, Sweden, 36+ years**

The main reason why people choose to be anonymous online is to protect personal information

The most popular reason for being anonymous online was to protect personal information – with 65% of respondents selecting this reason. It was the most common reason for being anonymous across all age groups.

The second most popular reason across all ages was ‘to feel safer’. The third most popular reason was ‘to protect my reputation’ – this was the third most popular reason for all age groups, except for 16-18s whose next most popular reason was because ‘It’s fun’. Protecting reputation didn’t make it into the top 5 for 16-18s. In addition, for 19-25s the joint third reason they chose is ‘to not get into trouble’.

Table 2: Age trends in reasons for being anonymous online

	13-15	16-18	19-25	26-35	36+	Total
To protect my personal information	54% (1 st)	62% (1 st)	72% (1 st)	69% (1 st)	68% (1 st)	65% (1 st)
To feel safer	45% (2 nd)	48% (2 nd)	52% (2 nd)	51% (2 nd)	28% (2 nd)	47% (2 nd)
To protect my reputation	27% (3 rd)	24% (=7 th)	31% (3 rd)	41% (3 rd)	20% (3 rd)	29% (3 rd)
To not get into trouble	21% (7 th)	24% (=7 th)	31% (3 rd)	37% (4 th)	19% (4 th)	27% (4 th)
To say something I’m embarrassed about	18% (8 th)	29% (=4 th)	28% (5 th)	23% (=5 th)	8% (=7 th)	23% (5 th)
To say something I’m scared to say	22% (6 th)	29% (=4 th)	24% (=7 th)	23% (=5 th)	8% (=7 th)	23% (6 th)
To give me confidence	26% (4 th)	26% (6 th)	24% (=7 th)	18% (8 th)	17% (6 th)	23% (7 th)
It’s fun	23% (5 th)	31% (3 rd)	27% (6 th)	15% (9 th)	4% (9 th)	23% (8 th)
To say something controversial	12% (9 th)	12% (9 th)	24% (=7 th)	23% (=5 th)	18% (5 th)	17% (9 th)
To do something that breaks the law	3% (10 th)	3% (10 th)	5% (10 th)	5% (10 th)	1% (10 th)	3% (10 th)

Base: 1,145 respondents that answered the question ‘Why might you choose to be anonymous on the internet?’ Multiple Choice (Multiple Answers).

There were a number of suggestions in the comment box about why users choose to be anonymous, including: to pretend to be someone else or have a fictional identity; to not have to give personal details to strangers;

because they can't be bothered to sign up with personal details; to get their voice heard without it being linked back to them; to say something bad about someone; to not feel judged by people and to escape any prejudice; to have random conversations with strangers; to take away the pressure of having to be careful with what you say; to hide information that you don't want people you know to find out; and to protect professional reputation.

"To sometimes pretend to be someone I'm not" - **Male, UK (13-15yrs)**

"To say what I think without everybody judging me for it" - **Female, Iceland (16-18yrs)**

"Nicknames and anonymity are kind of in the nature of Internet in my opinion. But it's also fun to have a "fictional identity" for games or other situations like them." - **Male, Finland (16-18yrs)**

"If you Google my name, my website shows up with the story of my life. I don't want people to know this about me when I'm playing a game. Otherwise they will use it against me. (cyber bullying)" - **Female, Netherlands (19-25yrs)**

"I simply don't want to have my name associated with everything I do. Much in the same way that I don't want my name hovering over my head in luminous letters when I buy groceries or walk down the street." - **Female, Ireland (19-25yrs)**

"I am trans but not out on the internet, since it's loads easier to be Just a Guy. So when I talk about trans issues, or... things like my childhood sexual abuse... I don't really want it connected to the same person other people might know from games and fandom and things." - **Male, US (26-35 yrs)**

"Because I don't want everything I say online to be documented and searchable for the rest of my life. I might change my mind, phrase things differently later etc. If I don't speak anonymously, I feel like I need to make extremely careful statements--like a politician speaking with a journalist. This is exhausting and I don't want to feel so restricted." - **Female, Netherlands (26-35 yrs)**

"To be protected from possible harmful offline actions related to my online expression; anonymity provides additional safety in the country with massive violation of human rights" - **Male, Russia (26-35 yrs)**

"So that I am not seen to be making a comment on behalf of, or impacting on, my employer or colleagues. So that my identity is not revealed to students that I teach." - **Male, Australia (36+ yrs)**

"To force my audience to pay attention to what I am saying, without pre-judging based on who I am" - **Female, Saint Lucia (36+ yrs)**

Many people feel they can express themselves more freely anonymously

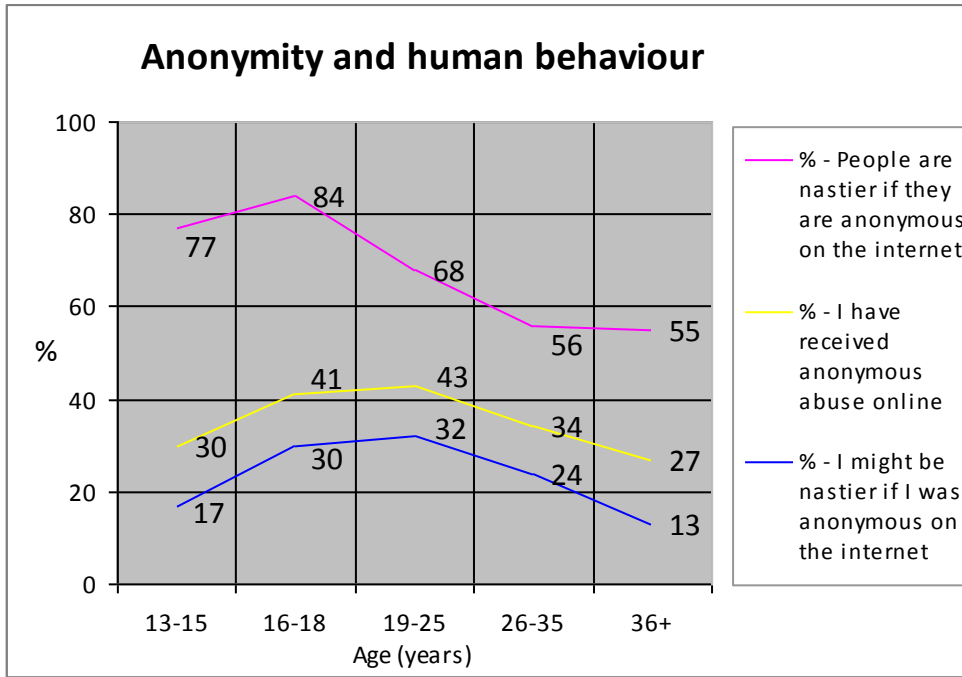
Overall, 59% of respondents said they are more likely to say what they want online if they are anonymous. However, 28% did not think they were more likely to say what they want if anonymous, and 13% didn't know.

The number of people reporting that they are more likely to say what they want online if they are anonymous shows a small age trend: 60% of 13-15 year olds, 56% of 16-18 year olds, 67% of 19-25 year olds, 56% of 26-35 year olds and 52% of over 36s.

This can sometimes result in anonymous users being abusive

The youth team were interested to explore whether people are more likely to be mean if they are anonymous on the internet. Overall, 71% felt that people are nastier if they are anonymous on the internet, with 18% saying they don't agree with this, while 11% said they didn't know. Overall, 37% said they had received abuse from an anonymous user on the internet – with a further 26% who hadn't experienced it personally, but knew someone who had. Furthermore, 25% thought they might be nastier if they were anonymous on the internet, while 59% said they would not be nastier, and 16% said they didn't know.

Graph 2: Age trends in attitudes, experiences and behaviours relating to anonymity online



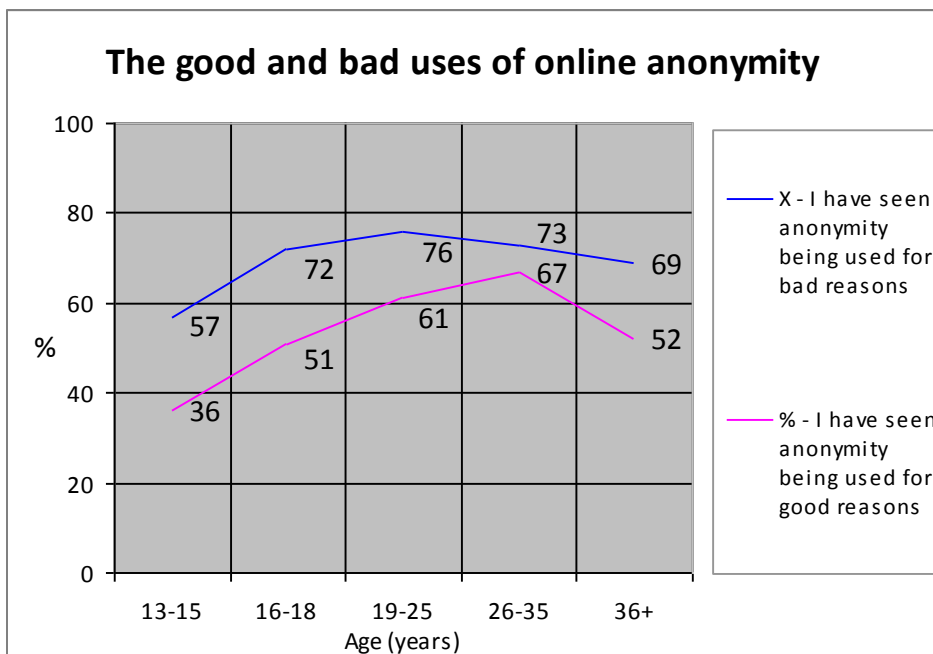
Base: This graph brings together statistics from 3 survey questions. **Series 1:** 1,140 respondents that answered the question 'Do you think people are nastier if they are anonymous on the internet?' Multiple Choice (Single Answer). **Series 2:** 1,140 respondents that answered the question 'Have you ever received abuse from an anonymous user on the internet?' Multiple Choice (Single Answer). **Series 3:** 1,144 respondents that answered the question 'Do you think you might be nastier if you were anonymous on the internet?' Multiple Choice (Single Answer).

Looking at the age trends, it is apparent that 16-18s are significantly more likely to believe that people are nastier when anonymous, plus they are more likely to have received anonymous abuse as well as admit that they might be nastier. Interestingly, the 19-25 age group have similar rates of personal experience of being targeted by anonymous abuse, as well as a similar level admitting they might be nastier when anonymous, but they are less likely than 16-18s to believe that people in general are nastier if they are anonymous on the internet (68% vs 84%).

The positive and negative uses of online anonymity

Overall, 53% of respondents said they had seen online anonymity being used for good reasons, while 70% of respondents said they had seen online anonymity being used for bad reasons.

Graph 3: Age trends in experiences of positive and negative uses of anonymity online



Base: This graph brings together statistics from 2 survey questions. **Series 1:** 1,136 respondents that answered the question 'Have you ever seen online anonymity being used for bad reasons?' Multiple Choice (Single Answer). **Series 2:** 1,138 respondents that answered the question 'Have you ever seen online anonymity being used for good reasons?'

Qualitative responses showed that the key negative use of anonymity is bullying and hate speech. Younger users highlighted that this happened on popular sites such as Ask.fm, Formspring and Tumblr. Many respondents also mentioned that women in particular are targets for anonymous abuse. Older teens and young adults also mentioned issues of sexual harassment, identity theft and the spreading of false information and rumours, as well as sharing embarrassing pictures or videos. They also mentioned the use of anonymity to 'stalk' people and gather personal information. Older adults also highlighted concerns about fake users trying to scam people.

"An anonymous person on Tumblr started posting bad comments full of hate onto another person's dashboard." - **Female, Austria (13-15 yrs)**

"bullying and asking offensive questions on ask.fm" - **Female, UK (13-15 yrs)**

"Many people use it wrong, They want to stay out of trouble and they really think that you can say whatever you like when you're acting anonymous. There is also a term called "anonhate" and I've seen a lot of it, in Tumblr, for example." - **Female, Finland (16-18 yrs)**

"Years ago when I was still in grade school people used online anonymity to bully and tease other students from school or stalk their ex boy/girlfriends and their doings (comments and likes etc)." - **Female, Finland (16-18 yrs)**

"hate tweets are sent almost constantly" - **Male, India (16-18 yrs)**

"I got harassed, threatened online by anonymous users after writing something in the newspaper as a 16 year old. I got threatened of being raped in a sadistic way and then killed." - **Female, Norway (16-18 yrs)**

"Attacking views of friends online on blogs etc., as an anonymous person." - **Female, India (16-18 yrs)**

"Fake facebook accounts to leave messages on groups created or invents" - **Male, UK (19-25 yrs)**

"People use fake names and the names of celebrities to dupe innocent people. Some also use anonymity to insult politicians and say nasty things that they cant otherwise say." - **Female, Ghana (26-35 yrs)**

"Heckling, sexism, rascism, very nasty abuse aimed at people without the chance to see who it's coming from or the chance to reply. A lot of people put their opinions online when they are angry or excited and the anonymity removes their filter filter for what's appropriate, they can say awful things to other people. Especially young women are being called horrible things!" - **Male, Sweden (26-35 yrs)**

"Posting rape threats as comments on articles that question patriarchal status quo." - **Female, India (36+ yrs)**

"maligning other peoples' character without easily being identified or held accountable" - **Male, Saint Kitts and Nevis (36+ yrs)**

While many respondents had experienced anonymity being used for negative purposes, there were also many who had experienced positive uses of anonymity. In particular, the key positive use mentioned was that anonymity enables people to seek help and get advice about potentially embarrassing, sensitive or taboo subjects. The second most common positive use of anonymity was that it allows you to say nice things to people that you might feel embarrassed to do otherwise, and that it enables you to do random acts of kindness online.

Many respondents spoke about the role that anonymity can play in allowing them to speak their mind, and explore other identities. Some respondents explained how it can allow you to post your creations, eg pictures or stories, that you might not want people to know were yours. Some respondents highlighted the role of anonymity in whistle blowing, reporting concerns and criticising governments or corporates.

Respondents also spoke about how being anonymous can protect you from a negative backlash, for example if you post a YouTube video or make controversial statements. Also how it can protect people who may be being bullied and give them an opportunity to escape their bullies, and that it can help people stand up for their friends online.

Some people are also using anonymity to avoid targeted advertising and social sharing of purchases. Many respondents also highlighted that anonymity can be used positively to protect privacy. In older age groups, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of ensuring personal online interactions don't affect professional reputation, and anonymity can be an effective way of separating personal and professional identities.

Furthermore, many respondents also highlighted that chatting to strangers anonymously can be fun and light-hearted – plus anonymity gives you a safe way to interact with strangers without sharing any personal information.

"To stand up for someone" - Female, Mexico (13-15 yrs)

"people often come help anonymously when some one is been bullied with other anonym" - Male, Finland (13-15s)

"If someone is trying to get help about something that they are embarrassed about" - Male, UK (13-15 yrs)

"it helped me deal with my mums cancer" - Female, UK (13-15 yrs)

"coming out gay" - Female, UK (13-15 yrs)

"People are able to talk about the problems they may be having at home or school in an online forum through anonymity. Others can discuss this problem and help them out." - Male, India (16-18 yrs)

"people compliment eachother; say things they wouldn't have the courage to say off anonymous" - Female, Estonia (16-18 yrs)

"People feel more relaxed when communicating anonymously as they can feel less intimidated by others. This can mean that people are more likely to leave you supportive or kind words online without sounding creepy or unusual. On tumblr, many people leave supportive anonymous messages to others which are in need. This can boost the recipient's morale." - Female, UK (16-18 yrs)

"Especially teenagers are still trying to figure out who they want to be and being anonymous on the internet is a great way to try different social roles safely." - Female, Finland (16-18 yrs)

"be more honest when posting comments without fear of being threaten" - Female, China (19-25 yrs)

"I have seen anonymity being used to voice opinions which may be controversial yet important to show both support (for example in case of LGBT rights) and disagreement (e.g. against corruption)" - Male, India (19-25 yrs)

"to discuss issues of sex, early marriage and other taboo topics" - Female, Kenya (19-25 yrs)

"For example, talking to people about some diseases, sex life etc private stuff and taboo topics, it's good to have anonymity. Especially when you live in a rural area where everyone already have a computer and everyone knows everyone. Also, for more minor reasons, a positive comment from anonymous can warm you more than a positive comment from a friend :)" - Female, Finland (19-25 yrs)

"Discussions about taboo topics eg homosexuality in Africa, sexual practises among women" - Female, Ghana (26-35 yrs)

"Sometimes activists can't use their real names for fear of persecution" - Female, South Africa (26-35 yrs)

"Someone complaining about their government anonymously. Sometimes I want to be treated as an ordinary citizen, not as a specific one." - Male, Brazil (26-35 yrs)

"Critiquing the state or powerful corporations eg. articles in webzines by pseudonyms which do this. Exploring sexuality. Exploring consensual casual relationships online." - Female, India (36+ yrs)

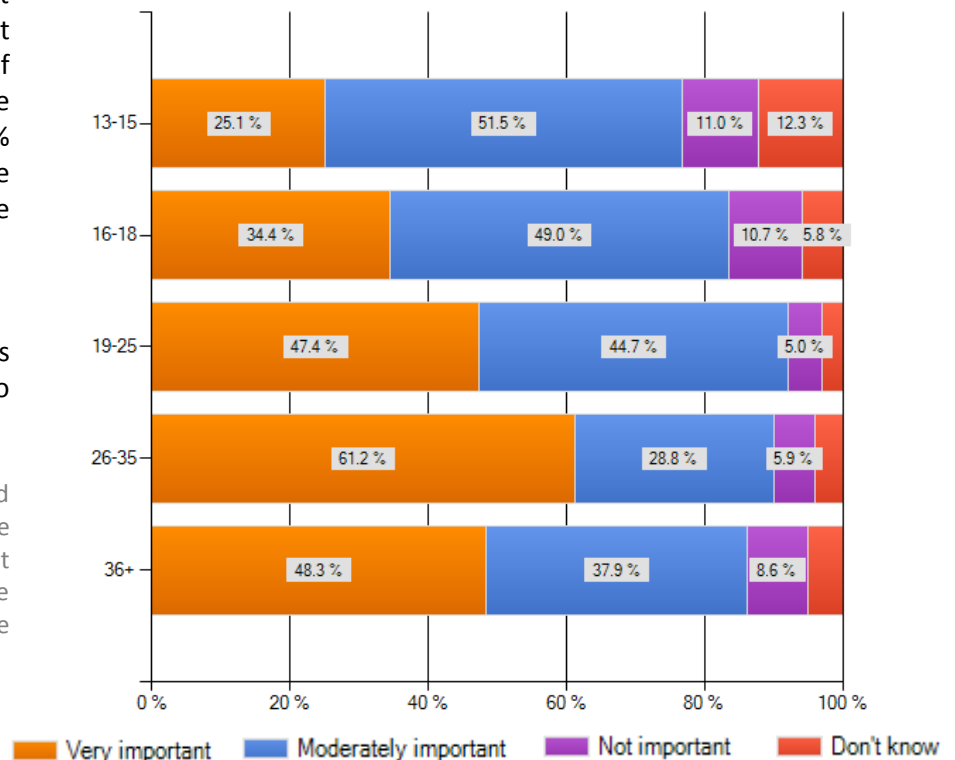
On balance, the majority felt that it is important that people are allowed to be anonymous if they want

“some people do use anonymity for bad reasons. those are the same that use the phone to make prank phone calls. let's ban the phone, then” - Male, Brazil (26-35 yrs)

We asked respondents to decide how important it was for people to be allowed to be anonymous online. Overwhelmingly we see that across all ages, anonymity is seen as an important thing to protect. Overall, 42% said that it is very important that people are allowed to be anonymous online, 44% said it is moderately important, and just 8% said it was not important, while 6% said they don't know. Interestingly, the support of anonymity is most marked among the 26-35 year old age group, with 61% saying it is very important that people are allowed to be anonymous online if they want.

> **Graph 4:** Age trends in attitudes about the importance of being able to be anonymous online.

Base: 1,123 respondents that answered the question 'Online anonymity can be used in both good and bad ways. Is it important that people are allowed to be anonymous online if they want?' Multiple Choice (Single Answer).



Conclusion

Communicating anonymously online is popular across all age groups, and it can bring both benefits and challenges.

As we share more and more information online, anonymity can be a way of protecting personal information and exploring sensitive topics, friendships and identities without the risk of these actions being linked back to them – or indeed it can help people escape prejudices that can come into play.

As in the offline world, we control what information we share with different people, and anonymity can be a way of separating the personal information you might share with family or friends from the information you might share with a stranger.

Many also felt that being anonymous online facilitates their freedom of expression, with many people saying they feel more comfortable with expressing their views, protesting and discussing taboo subjects.

However, despite these clear benefits, the vast majority also felt that people can be nastier if they are anonymous on the internet, although fewer people reported that they had directly received anonymous abuse, and even fewer admitted they themselves might be nastier if they were anonymous. As one female, aged 16-18 years, from Finland said “it's easier to be rude or offensive when your comments cannot be connected to you --> no consequences”. This lack of accountability perhaps creates both the negative and positive outcomes of anonymity.

Despite the negative aspects of anonymity online, the vast majority felt that it is important that people are allowed to be anonymous online if they want to be.