

What young people ask about when guaranteed anonymity

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Social science researchers at SINTEF and NTNU have recently analysed almost 300,000 questions submitted to the website ung.no. Among other things, the project has been looking into questions correlated with age and gender, with a particular focus on gender. The girls shown in the photo did not take part in the study. Credit: Christina Benjaminsen

An analysis of almost 300,000 unsolicited questions written by young Norwegians on the website ung.no, has provided major insights into what they're really interested in today. Their bodies, health and identity are among the topics heading the list.

The aim of the analysis is to improve and build on the Norwegian website ung.no, but it may also lead to future enhancements in other youth services. The data obtained may perhaps also contribute towards shaping future youth policies.

"Ung.no acts as a counterweight to all the superficial information currently available on the internet," says SINTEF researcher Eva Lassemo. "Instead of watching more or less serious YouTube channels, this website provides an opportunity to ask questions and get answers. A panel of more than 200 experts and specialists stand ready to provide help and find answers to questions about what [young people](#) are really concerned about," she says.

"Young people can write anonymously on ung.no, and this makes it easier for them to obtain information about things that may not be so easy to find out about in other ways," continues Lassemo. "A large proportion of the questions asked relate to topics that many feel are difficult to talk about. So in many cases this will be the first time that a young person has put their thoughts and feelings into words. This reflects just how important such a channel is," she says.

Lassemo has headed this insight research project in which SINTEF, in collaboration with NTNU Social Research, has been analyzing almost 300,000 questions submitted to ung.no. The analysis is being carried out under contract for the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (BufDir), which administers the website.

The aim of the project has been to obtain knowledge about what preoccupies young people today, and about what issues they are seeking help on when they submit their questions on the website.

Unique material

Beate Aas at Bufdir emphasizes the benefits of the fact that the questions written in the website's comments field are unsolicited.

"This is what really preoccupies young people," says Aas. "The questions are honest and genuine, and this makes the material both unique and exciting. When, at the same time, we have as many as 300,000 questions and answers, such data clearly provide an excellent insight into what children and young people are concerned about today," she says.

Aas believes that the database provided by the question and answer service on ung.no is of such high quality that it should be used to guide future national youth policies.

The most popular topics

The most common topics of the questions submitted to ung.no are physical health, sex, choices about future education, rules and rights, stresses and frustration linked to school, love, and poor relationships with friends and parents.

All the questions on the website were used to develop thematic statistics, while the content of a selection of questions and answers were analyzed in greater depth.

The research project has investigated questions taken from three categories:

- The body, health and identity
- School, education and work
- Friends, love and recreation

Overall, these three main categories contained about three quarters of all the questions submitted to ung.no.

"The project has also had the aim of looking into how young peoples' questions are correlated with gender and age, with a particular focus on gender," says Lassemo.

More than a third of the questions are in the category "The body, health and identity." Most of these are submitted by girls (62.6 percent) and by the youngest (13 to 16) age group (61.5 percent).

Typical topics in this category include physical [health](#), weight, gender-specific issues, as well as sex and contraception.

Lassemo says that, naturally enough, some topics are typical for boys, others for girls.

"The eldest girls are preoccupied with contraception, while the youngest submitted questions about weight, food and eating habits," she says.

"The youngest boys had questions about the penis, while boys of all ages are preoccupied with the law and traffic offenses," says Lassemo.

Girls and the youngest are most active

Statistics from the research project also show that 72 percent of the questions were submitted by girls, and that the youngest were the most active with two out of three users being between 13 and 16 years of age.

"We're still trying to find out why by far the majority of those submitting questions are girls," says Lassemo. "Anyhow, it is a reflection of the general tendency that boys and men seek help to a much lesser extent than girls and women," she says.

Lassemo believes that this is a problem.

"There is no reason to suppose that boys have things so much easier than

girls. We simply don't know from where they get help and answers to their questions," she says.

Using research to improve the service

Bufdir is using the insights obtained from this research to further develop the ung.no website. Perhaps this will lead to more boys making use of the question and answer service.

"We have removed the comments field, prepared new guidelines, and have introduced a greater focus on gender issues," says Aas. "We have modified our use of images and changed the graphic layout, methods of responding, focus on content and channel selection, all with the aim of reaching out to groups based on interesting finds that have emerged during the analysis," she says.

This insight research project has also helped to develop awareness among members on the expert panel. Among other things, it has resulted in a more holistic approach to providing answers.

Aas believes that obtaining such specific feedback based on statistics and analysis has been very useful.

"We're working continuously on how to reach young people, and this research has helped us to make further improvements. We've now introduced an even greater focus on issues related to equal opportunity and gender," she says.

The analysis could also be used by the agency and the Ministry to further develop other services for young people.

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

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