

DEEPER MORE CANDID INSIGHTS FASTER? IT'S POSSIBLE WITH ONLINE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

Online research has been called a poor sister to traditional qualitative face-to-face research, as the subtleties of non-verbal communication are lost. In our paper we have used online qualitative research via bulletin boards to demonstrate the strength of the written word – the depth of introspection compared with the ‘verbal diarrhoea’ of a conversation which we believe can make the output of online research a powerful alternative to the focus group – a different window into the soul of a certain level of respondents!

We selected a sensitive topic, “issues facing teens in the techno age”, touching on various sensitive topics such as pornographic images on phones, drugs and alcohol to demonstrate the strength and honesty of the written word.

1. Introduction

Online research methodologies are traditionally a hot debate for the majority of South African marketers and researchers, purely because of the virtue of the market conditions within our developing country. According to Webchek's 2006 OmniChek surveys, an average of 14% of the South African metropolitan population over the age of 18, has access to the internet. Although this number is low compared to that of the USA (69%), it is growing and will continue to grow.

Online research has been conducted in the USA for over 10 years and its popularity is increasing, also beyond the borders of North America.

It developed out of list-serve discussions into chat groups and bulletin groups and more recently, multi-media online focus groups utilising webcam and phone or VOIP so that participants can see and hear each other. Some innovative recent uses have included a 'bricolage' of the above methods incorporating immersions, blogs, digital media and wireless devices.

The main advantage of this methodology is that it makes it possible to engage difficult-to-recruit and geographically dispersed target populations, and have them interact with one another. This interaction is lost in face-to-face in-depth interviews which is usually the favoured traditional method of reaching these markets.

At present, online research in South Africa is very small; however, given the increased difficulties of recruiting South African respondents (particularly in the upper LSMs, business to business, professionals etc) we believe that online research will in time to come become the preferred medium to conduct qualitative research with difficult-to-recruit respondents. It also gives us the opportunity to research respondents that are loathe to travel in the evenings due to safety reasons.

We are, however, not suggesting that online qualitative research should replace traditional face-to-face qualitative methods. We feel that online qualitative research is an opportunity to expand the total qualitative category and must be seen as another qualitative tool, with excellent strengths and advantages when applied appropriately.

2. Objective

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value that can be achieved with online research and to highlight the benefits of using the internet as an alternative or complementary tool to conduct qualitative market research in South Africa.

Stats around the world indicate that access to the internet is growing at an exponential rate, as indicated in the following chart:

Country	Population millions	Internet users P 100 inhabitants	Use growth 2000-2007 (World total 203%)	High speed P 100 inhabitants	Cell handsets P 100 inhabitants
Australia	20	72	123%	17	91
Canada	33	66	73%	22	50
China	1314	9	487%	3.4	33
France	63	48	263%	18	79
Germany	82	61	110%	15	96
India	1095	5	700%	0.2	6
Italy	58	50	1335	13	124
New Zealand	4	79	286%	12	87
South Africa	44 to 49 *	8 to 11 *	113%	1 *	77
Sweden	9	75	70%	23	94
UK	61	62	144%	19	100
USA	298	69	121%	19	73

Source references: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>
<http://www.oecd.org>
<http://www.internetworldstats.com>

Notes on SA statistics:

- The CIA website gives SA population as 44.187 million and state that Aids deaths have been taken into account in calculation. StatsSA website uses 47.4million, while the Internet World Stats site give quotes 49 million.
- With regard to Internet users, both the CIA and Internet World Stats sites state that South Africa has 5.1 million Internet users, while local authority, Arthur Goldstuck's, last official count was in the region of 3.75 million users.
- No exact figures are available on the total number of broadband subscribers, but the estimated figure is well over 400 000 and closing in on half million (<http://www.mybroadband.co.za/nephp/?m=show&id=5607>)

Online qualitative research is growing as the number of internet consumers (and broadband in particular) is increasing. Globalisation requires better global research solutions as software becomes more user-friendly, more reliable and more sophisticated.

Given the above stats, we cannot ignore the opportunity that exists for online research within the South African context.

3. Evaluating online qualitative methodologies

3.1 Types of online qualitative methodologies

There are several different communication channels that can be used to conduct online qualitative research. The most commonly used tools include the following:

1. **Real-time focus groups** which evolved from chat rooms. They are synchronous, live chat with between seven and nine respondents and last for about two hours
2. **Bulletin board focus groups/discussion boards** which evolved from message boards. They are asynchronous and threaded and last for three or more days with between 15 and 20 respondents
3. **Multi-media online focus groups** which use webcams and phone or VOIP, which allows participants to see and hear one another
4. A **'bricolage'** of the above incorporating immersions, blogs, digital media and wireless devices

Given the low incidence of internet access in South Africa, we feel that bulletin boards have the most potential initially for the South African market. After evaluating the different online methodologies, we felt that bulletin boards are the most user-friendly to the respondent as they can log in and take part in the discussion at any time suitable to their schedule and stay for as long as they wish, as the discussion is asynchronous. The discussion usually lasts for three or more days and involves about 15 to 20 respondents who revisit the board at least once (but preferably twice) a day during the period. Bulletin boards are interactive and provide respondents with sufficient time to truly think about their responses, thereby adding depth and credibility to the output obtained from this medium.

The anonymity of taking part in an online discussion promotes disclosing deeper, more personal, honest responses. It has also been our experience that respondents provide more thoughtful, in-depth answers using this methodology compared to the input generated from in-depth interviews.

From the research and the client team's perspective, the methodology is time- and cost-effective as there is a considerable saving on travel and downtime away from the office. The virtual viewing room has unlimited space for observers who can post private messages to the moderator. And time is furthermore saved with the availability of instant transcripts.

3.2 When to consider online qualitative research

Online qualitative research should be considered if the target market is familiar with and comfortable using the internet. Examples of such people are teenagers, students, young professionals, higher socio-economic groups and business people, to name but a few.

The internet to them has become the norm in terms of communication (email, instant messages, Skype), a source for information/research and a medium for transacting online whether it be for banking or online bookings or shopping.

Older age segments and lower socio-economic groups who are less comfortable with technology and who have less access to (and experience with) the internet, should rather be researched using face-to-face or telephonic qualitative methods.

Online qualitative methods are particularly useful when:

- The incidence of using the product or service is low or specialised
- The target market is geographically dispersed
- The target population is known to be difficult to recruit (examples of this could be people not wanting to travel to a central venue or time-strapped business people and professionals such as doctors and handicapped people and mothers with young babies)
- The research topic relates to high tech products and services

3.3 The strengths and weaknesses of online qualitative methodologies

The following points are considered the strengths of such a medium:

- Considerable saving on travel and downtime away from the office for research and client teams
- Room for unlimited observers
- Anonymity promotes disclosing deeper, more personal, honest responses
- No geographical limitations
- Dominating respondents are neutralised – everyone has an equal opportunity to participate
- Instant transcripts
- Difficult-to-recruit targets are more feasible
- Can share test material: text, graphics, video and the like (but should avoid if material is highly confidential)

The following points are the weaknesses of such a medium:

- No body language to read, must rely on other clues
- Less control over respondents' environment - they may be distracted during the discussion
- Requires adequate computer/keyboard skills
- Cannot touch/taste/try objects unless distributed in advance
- Technology is not perfect
 - Unexpected technology problems
- Potential resistance from conservative-minded clients
 - Unfamiliar environment for moderators and clients

3.4 Live chats versus bulletin boards

If one had to compare an online focus group with a bulletin board, the following would be evident:

Real-time online focus groups	Bulletin boards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 to 12 respondents • Session length 90 minutes to two hours • No limit to the number of observers • Incentives similar to traditional groups • Fast-paced/high energy – moderator required to have excellent keyboard skills (or use an assistant) • Brief answers: Topics that require quick spontaneous, top-of-mind responses • Fast turnaround – ideal for rush jobs/where quick ‘dipstick’ feedback is required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 to 25 respondents • Session is three to five days in length – some do longer, even month-long panels • No limit to the number of observers • Incentives about 50% higher than traditional groups • Individual pace: Can log in and out as schedule permits • Detailed responses: Topics that require thoughtful answers, in-depth analysis, long-term interaction • Particularly convenient/suitable for participants with incompatible schedules

We recommend bulletin boards as an effective online tool for the South African market because of their asynchronous nature and the longer time frame which promotes rich responses. They combine the depth of in-depth interviews with the dynamics of the group interaction. They are less fast-paced or time-pressured compared to real-time and face-to-face groups. Participants can reflect, revisit and add new thoughts at their leisure. From the bulletin board, you are able to get voluminous transcripts which are the equivalent of data from three to four face-to-face groups.

Bulletin boards are also easier to take part in and are more accessible as fast reading and typing speeds are not required for either the participants or the moderator. No geographic boundaries are favoured – you can have both nationwide as well as international representation on the same bulletin board. The fact that the responses are anonymous allows for more candid, honest responses.

3.5 Logistics compared to traditional qualitative research

When conducting online research, the process is very similar to traditional qualitative research. The following steps are undertaken:

- Finalise appropriate methodology/approach
- Book virtual facility, moderator and brief recruiters
- Recruit – a combination of traditional methods and email solicitations – usually from databases
 - Can include online screener but also recommend to rescreen telephonically
- Develop and upload discussion guide and stimulus materials
 - Discussion guide differs from traditional guide in that it is far more comprehensive – more like a conversational script
- Conduct groups/bulletin boards
 - Apart from actual moderating, constant communication with respondents is very important
 - Email or private messaging is used to
 - Motivate participation/express encouragement/positive regard
 - Daily reminders/new instructions/thank you's
- Download transcripts
- Distribute incentives to respondents (easiest to do via electronic transfer)
- Conduct analysis and prepare report/presentation

3.6 Virtual facility/software

Research software has been developed to ensure the security and integrity of a group session online. The moderator, respondents and client observers meet in a virtual discussion room. The discussion is visible to all the participants. Software makes it possible to see other participants' responses only once they have posted their response. There is also an option to see your own responses only (i.e. the platform can be used to conduct a series of simultaneous individual interviews). Software highlights new posts that have been added since the participants' last visit which makes it unnecessary to sift through material read previously.

Confidential access to the discussion is facilitated with passwords. Observers/clients can post comments/questions/further probes to the moderator, thereby ensuring an interactive session with an understanding of the subject being researched. Software makes provision to upload test material to expose to respondents. The role of the moderator and information provided by various respondents is illustrated overleaf:

Here is text taken directly from the bulletin board:

[Corette](#) March 2, 2007 01:13:59 REPLY COMMENT EDIT DELETE

Welcome back to the last day of our discussion. Today we are tackling some sensitive topics and I want to start off by reminding you that we will treat all the information you share with us in the strictest confidence. I really hope that by now you feel comfortable and safe in this group that you will share your true feelings and opinions about these issues with us.

One reads and hears a lot about the easy availability of drugs. I would really appreciate it very much if you would share with me your insider view of the situation in your school/

circle of friends/ community.

Have you or any of your friends/ classmates ever tried any drugs? Please tell me more about the experience – What drug did you/ they try? How did you/they get hold of it? Where were you/they at the time?

[Scorpio](#) March 4, 2007 10:48:12

REPLY COMMENT EDIT DELETE

drugs is a very popular thing in our schools today!!! many schools u go to all have got hold of drugs in some kind of way. I know my school has!!! 😞 its a really scary thing to think that people r taking drugs in your school even your closest friends.none of my friends take drugs so i have never ever been influence to take drugs. thank g-d!!! I have never ever tried drugs never have never will!!! im really against smoking, and any other sort of drug. i have got class mates that DO TAKE DRUGS and its a really scary thought. many people smoke in my school and do more than just smoking.

[Sushi](#) March 4, 2007 19:42:53

REPLY COMMENT EDIT DELETE

It sounds as though my school and your school are pretty much the same which is a bad thing

[Dorothy](#) March 4, 2007 13:21:02

REPLY COMMENT EDIT DELETE

well i am in a girls school and all the girls are so busy with school ans sport that we don't have time to even think about it and we all know about it but wee would never use it or eve smoke because we know if you start you can't stop and drugs have nothing good to it so nor me or my friends have used it or will and my school is drug freeeeee. in my school 1 out of 100 girls smoke. i am very lucky to have good sircunstances. 😊

4. The results of the survey

We selected a sensitive topic as the basis of our research in order to engage our respondents. “Issues facing teens in the techno age” includes topics such as pornographic images on phones, drugs and alcohol. The core objectives of the survey were to demonstrate the strength of an online medium to reach and engage respondents throughout the country as well as demonstrate the strength of the written word in terms of richness and depth of information gleaned from such a medium.

Online research was undertaken using bulletin boards. Two bulletin board studies were conducted amongst 14 to 16 year-olds - one amongst boys and one amongst girls. The reason for splitting the sample was to establish whether issues facing teens today differed

amongst boys and girls. We also felt it would allow the teens to be more honest and open if they didn't feel the need to impress or shock the opposite sex.

The sample achieved for the bulletin boards was as follows:

	Girls	Boys
Number achieved in each bulletin board	13	8
Area resided in:		
JHB	7	6
DBN	1	1
CTN	5	1

In order to qualify for the interview, respondents had to:

- Have their own cellphone for personal usage
- Be aged between 14 and 16 years
- Have a cellphone that is able to send and receive images
- Have internet access at home
- Have a PC that is less than four years old
- Be comfortable using email/surfing the net
- Spend at least two to three hours a week on the internet
- Have been on Mxit in the last week

As a check that they were familiar with the internet, we asked the following questions:

What is H, T, T, P, colon, slash, slash, W, W, W, dot?

- | |
|------------------------------|
| 1. ALLOW SPONTANEOUS RECALL. |
| 2. DO NOT READ OUT. |

A signal to reboot your computer		⇒ CLOSE
Part of the address of a website		⇒ CONTINUE
An instruction to save a document		⇒ CLOSE
Don't know		⇒ CLOSE

13. If you see an underlined word on the internet, what does it most likely mean?

- | |
|-------------------------------|
| 1. ALLOW SPONTANEOUS MENTION. |
| 2. DO NOT READ OUT. |

A signal to reboot your computer		⇒ CLOSE
Link to another site or another page on the web		⇒ CONTINUE
An instruction to save a document		⇒ CLOSE
Don't know		⇒ CLOSE

4.1 Communicating with teenage respondents

Given that our study was addressing teens aged 14 to 16 years, it was important to adapt the communication medium to this target group. We found that respondents did not pay

enough attention to email communication and that it was more effective to communicate with them about the bulletin board via SMSes on their cellphones. The following types of reminders were sent through to them:

- Alert to check email
- Reminders
- Encouragement
- Brief instructions

Despite the absence of body language, teenagers used novel ways to express their identity/emotions. They used abbreviated SMS language as well as the use of colour and emoticons to further express themselves.

4.2 General observations

We found that bulletin boards were an effective medium to engage with a teenage target market in South Africa. Our findings confirmed the sentiments expressed by our QRCA colleagues, Jay Zaltzman and Shaili Bhatt who have both conducted many bulletin board studies in the United States.

“Typically in teen focus groups, most respondents seem so worried about not seeming uncool in front of their peers that they will barely say anything and what they do say tends to be negative. In the online discussion board focus groups, they were anonymous, they couldn’t see each other, and they were in the psychological comfort of their own homes. They were much more willing to express opinions that differed from others and just seemed to contribute more. Also, this medium is very familiar to kids this age.

That’s why I can’t see going back to face to face groups with tweens and teens.”

Jay Zaltzman, Bureau West Research Group, Los Angeles
<http://www.bureauwest.com>

“I have experienced the high quality, depth of responses and emotions from tweens/teens online that I have been unable to achieve in a standard 2-hour focus group. I have conducted studies that started in an online discussion board, the virtual world, and then we continued the research with a second group of tweens in a physical setting. The fun and responsiveness in the physical FG room was there to some extent, but after our online experience, it was obvious that the kids’ conversations were inhibited by the group’s presence and the ‘research’ atmosphere.

Online discussions just seem to be more natural to kids this age; many of them participate in online communities/forums in everyday life. I feel that online discussions have helped to remove the intimidating ‘cool’ factor that plagues some tweens/teens.”

Shaili Bhatt, Wooldrige Associates, Inc., Chicago
<http://www.WAstrategy.com>

To back up our thoughts regarding online being the better medium to use for researching teens, we asked them to give us honest feedback on how they felt doing a study online.

The response was overwhelmingly positive as can be seen by the following quotes. The general consensus was the comfort they took in the anonymity of their answers, which allowed them to be much more honest and open:

“I felt safe because you don’t reveal any confidential details... my name was anonymous.. and the moderator was really funny and the questions asked were really good as they were based on issues that affect the youth and we all got an opportunity to share different ideas...” (girl)

“I found it a really comfortable way of communicating bec no I know who I was. I could say wat id like and be honest and not get imbarrest!!!!!!” (boy)

“I felt really safe and confident” (girl)

“it was lank easy. It was nice that we could see the other peoples answers as well to compare them to our own” (boy)

When probed on how they felt about the instructions on how to do the bulletin boards, there seemed to be no problems; in fact, at times, the boys felt the instructions were too detailed.

“nothing wrong with your instructions, found it easy to do, felt at one stage that u were thinking that we are retards for explaining it so well” (boy)

“your instructions were all right but u didn’t take into account the fact that we can also think” (boy)

A learning from this is to understand who your target audience is when putting together instructions and to word them accordingly. We forget how familiar this age group is with technology.

Opinions were divided regarding the best time to conduct such a study with teens. Some opted for the weekend option whereas others opted for the weekday option. For those preferring the weekend, they felt that they had more time to ponder over the questions whereas for those who wanted during the week, they felt that they were far too busy over a weekend to take part.

From the analysis of activity on the bulletin board, we estimated that teens were spending an average of between 30 and 40 minutes a day answering the questions. Examples taken from our bulletin research and in-depth answers received are given below:

Living without a cellphone

Imagine that you have to live without your cellphone (maybe it was stolen, taken away for punishment or not working). What is your first reaction? How long do you think you can live without it? How will you feel without it?

Teens were very emotive when answering these questions, which is indicative of how much a cellphone is a part of their lives. The use of capital letters and exclamation marks further highlighted their emotion in response to the question. Comments like “*I would DIE!*” (girl) to “*my first reaction would be to go out and find a bottle of sleeping pills, a brandy and a rope....*” (boy) and “*I am a slave to my phone*” (girl) were not uncommon.

This quote really encapsulates the relationship teens have with their cellphones, it clearly is an extension of who they are:

“First of all.... My cellphone is like my pride and joy...” (girl)

“My cel phone is like my safe, its got my personal details and stuff. If it were to be taken away from me .. I would beg for it back. I would nag and irritate people.... my cel is always with me.... EVERYWHERE... so if I had to loose it then I would feel like a part of me is missing.....” (girl)

Teens seem to rely heavily on the cellphone as a form of entertainment and feel that without a cellphone, life would be very boring. Cellphones seem to rule many of their lives with some teens admitting to spending as much as between three and six hours daily in chat rooms. Some even admitted to being on their phone in the company of friends.

“When I am with my friends they get pissed off because all my attention is on my phone and not them” (boy)

Amongst some teens, there was, however, recognition of the negative impact it has on their lives.

“I am ashamed to say that I am a slave to my phone,, I know its bad, but mxit has got me hooked. Maybe if my phone was taken away I would lead a more productive life” (girl)

There was consensus that school work would definitely improve as there wouldn’t be constant interruptions or late-night chatting.

The only benefit of not having a cellphone would be the money that would be saved as they wouldn’t have to buy airtime. Some mention was also made of the fact that their parents would no longer be complaining about how much time was spent on the cellphone.

Cellphone usage

Cellphones are primarily used as a communication tool, whether it be chatting, SMSing or using Mxit. It seems that texting via SMS or Mxit is far more prevalent than actually

chatting on the phone: *“my phone is my link between friends”* (boy). Boys were a lot more likely to use the other more advanced features on the phone, such as games, surfing the net, music, WAP capabilities, email, watching TV (limited), reading e-books (limited) and PowerPoint. Both boys and girls are using the diary capabilities to record homework.

Computers and the internet

While both boys and girls mentioned using the internet for school projects, boys were more likely to use the computer for downloading music, playing games, Skype and online shopping. Girls were more likely to be using MSN and the email function. The frequency of going online depended very much on what type of connection they had.

Mxit

Online behaviour expert, Ramon Thomas (who heads Netucation Online Research, www.netucation.co.za and who authored the web-based book “Parents’ Guide to Mxit”) describes Mxit as a popular mobile chat service that is used by over 2.3 million people, mostly teenagers and 20somethings in South Africa.

There has been a lot of publicity on Mxit in the media of late. An online safety action campaign ([Http://onlinesafety.org.za](http://onlinesafety.org.za)) has been launched to try and make cellphones safer for everyone. Barbara Hollands reported the following: *“the trendy new cellphone chat system, Mxit, is luring teens and adults into a sordid underworld of sex, treachery, pornography and infidelity”*.

All teens who took part in the bulletin board were Mxit users. Mxit was described by them as a huge chat room and was compared to email and SMSing at a fraction of the price.

“It’s a typical way of sending sms’s to your friends via GPRS.. It’s really convenient because it is really cheap.. sending a msg would cost about 1c and I think it is the best thing ever invented because I get to save a lot of money/airtime” (girl)

Instant messages are sent back and forth and it is recorded like a conversation.

There are two options on Mxit. The first is to set up your own chat room by inviting your friends using their Mxit numbers and the second is to go into open chat rooms. It takes as little as 10 minutes to register. Most teens who took part in the study were more likely to converse with their friends in a chat room; however, there were some who went into open chat rooms.

“Mxit is like a huge chat room! Its cool to chat to about 170 people at once but it gets hectic, luckily for the ‘away’ function! Our whole friend group have mxit! I have to say it is like poison in your battery”(boy)

Some girls mentioned enjoying the challenge of trying to get a boy to ask you out. For some girls, having a boy ask you out was when the challenge was over and then they would move on but for others, they would then actually meet up with the boy. One of the girls mentioned her friend having gone on a date with a boy she met through Mxit and having being raped by him.

In the open chat rooms, a few of the respondents mentioned having had bad experiences:

“my friend talked to a person in his school and the crazy guy looked for clues and eventually found my friend. He followed him home and threatened to murder his parents” (boy)

“I went into a bit of a random chat room when I was younger and I started talking to a chick who was in the room – it turned out it was a gay guy and he stalked me for about three months, scariest time of my life” (boy)

“My friend is very gullable.. which can be dangerous.. she was chatting to a guy for about a month who she thought was about 16 and one day she phoned him at his house and it turned out to be a MARRIED 50 yr old man.. so always be careful with chat rooms and NEVER give your personal details out!” (girl)

Given the media hype, we asked teens whether they were aware of the potential dangers for teens taking part in chat rooms, as well as what steps they could take to protect themselves.

They were all aware of the dangers of Mxit and between both boys and girls, they compiled a list of no-no's in chat rooms:

1. Never give out your personal info (including name and surname)
2. Never say your exact address (e.g. say only your city)
3. Don't EVER suggest meeting up with a person
4. Don't feel obliged to chat to the person
5. Don't tell anyone your password

A few of the boys mentioned going into open chat rooms to insult people or to tell lies about themselves to string people along.

“when I go into chat rooms I only insult people coz u may as well, they'll never find out who u are” (boy)

“I just take everything in chatrooms as a joke. people lie so much- I know I do in chat rooms”(boy)

A couple of the girls mentioned getting bored with Mxit.

“but it kinda gets old, like it becomes routine and eventually you find that you are saying the same things everyday to the same people because everyone is on all day, everyday!”
(girl)

“people repeat their conversations so it can get boring” (girl)

School policy with cellphones

All schools seem to have a policy regarding the use of cellphones. While some schools ban them outright, others allow pupils to use their phones before and after school as well as during break time.

Punishments for being found using a cellphone during school time vary from having to pay a fine to having it confiscated for a period of time. Some schools were more lenient on first-time offenders than others. The worst punishment for being found using a cellphone would be either to be suspended or to have the phone confiscated for the rest of the year. Some teens mentioned pupils ignoring the threats and using Mxit during class to insult the teachers.

“yes they do have a policy but we don’t obey the policy because we are addicted to mxit” (girl)

Some mention was made of schools having this policy because children have been killed for their cellphones.

Cellphones and how they affect your self-image

Most teens feel that cellphones don’t affect their self-esteem or self-confidence. However, there are some teens who feel it improves their self-esteem as in real life, they are very shy and find it hard to express themselves.

“I have a really low self esteem so for me using my cel phone is a much easier way to communicate with people than face to face” (girl)

“I have a lot more self confidence when I am chatting on the phone” (boy)

Improve or damage relationship with friends/family?

The majority of teens believe cellphone usage improves their relationships with their friends as they are constantly in contact with one another.

“When you speak to someone everyday you are bound to learn something new about each other” (girl)

Although there isn’t that face-to-face contact or any expression of emotion, they still feel it brings them closer together.

“We are on the phone 24/7 so we are sure to get closer” (girl)

There is some recognition of the fact that sometimes these relationships are quite superficial.

“I have become extremely close to some of my friends, even best friends although I do not fully agree with electronic friendships (ie only talking to a person over the phone, or sms or mxit) as they can be rather fake and superficial - they are a great way to start friendships, but then again using a phone to communicate you cannot always see anothers reaction , feelings and emotions to what you are saying and therefore you can read things the wrong way which in my experience of this can be detrimental to some relationship” (girl)

The friendships tend to be more superficial as illustrated in the following quote:

“every now and then someone picks a fight but you are just able to get over it quicker” (girl)

Cellphone usage was definitely seen to damage relationships with their own families with their parents constantly nagging them to get off the phone.

“My parents hate the amount of time I spend on the phone, they think it is rather stupid and that I could be doing more constructive things so it damages my relationship with them” (girl)

“I totally damage my relationship with my family because they don’t understand my phone – I also get to say exactly what I want to my brother via sms which is not so good – we hardly talk” (girl)

Unsavoury images on cellphones

One of the questions we wanted to ask was what exposure, if any, teens have had on their cellphones to risqué or undesirable pictures/images. Most teens, whether it was themselves or friends of theirs, have been exposed to this sort of material.

The boys were more likely to have had first-hand experience of such material whereas the girls were more likely to have known someone who has had access to such material.

Amongst boys, risqué images seemed to be quite popular. Girls would mention some boys having naked girls as their screen saver.

The boys in particular were not shy to tell us what sort of images they had been exposed to or had personally sent themselves.

“I dated a girl for a while and we sent each other such pictures (nude)” (boy)

“I’ve seen pictures of people being executed and lank videos of fights” (boy)

“Porn is almost everywhere” (boy)

“This is what happens when you go onto mxit late at night” (boy)

“I have never received or sent such photos but I know some girls in my grade took nasty photos of themselves and put them on the net” (girl)

“last year about 5 to 7 girls in the grade below me took a really raunchy photo and it got onto this boy in my grades website. It’s their fault for letting him get hold of the photo – it damaged their reputation” (girl)

The Film and Publication Board (FPB) recently conducted research on the extent of the South African youth’s exposure to pornographic material (<http://www.fpb.gov.za/research/docs/report.pdf>.) *The FPB is a classification authority dealing with audiovisual material with due regard to the protection of children from inappropriate and potentially harmful and disturbing material under the Film and Publication Act.*

Their objective was to explore the exposure of children to pornographic material including the extent to which they are accidentally and intentionally exposed to sexually inappropriate material through the internet and other mediums such as film, cellphones and magazines.

The sample of the research comprised high school learners in the age group 13 to 17 years, both boys and girls and different race groups in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. In total, 943 questionnaires were completed out of the 1000 sent out.

In their findings, 67% of the sample have watched a pornographic movie with 81% claiming that they know their friends have pornographic images on their cellphones. They also reported that boys tended to watch pornographic movies more so than girls.

Given the sensitivity of this topic, it is our belief that the responses and honesty we received from the written word were more honest and powerful than if we had asked this question of a group of teens sitting in the same room.

There was a feeling amongst both boys and girls that teens who take part in these risqué images are insecure and are doing it for attention.

Parents’ reactions to activities on both the internet and cellphone

Most parents are aware of their children’s activities on the cellphone and the internet.

“my parents don’t really mind what I do. They trust me and respect my privacy” (girl)

A lot of teens mentioned their parents trusting them.

The biggest issue teens had with their parents was school work. Parents also often complained about how much time was being spent on the cellphone.

Drugs

It seems that experimentation with drugs and alcohol, particularly amongst boys, is common during adolescence. Almost all the teens who took part in the study had either themselves taken drugs or knew of friends who had taken or experimented with drugs.

This is not uncommon as highlighted by Focus Adolescent Services (FocusAS): *“Experimentation with drugs during adolescence is common”*.

“I have tried weed and coke before and Im still stugelling with my coke addition. It completely F’s up your life and can destroy everything you ever had” (boy)

“I got it at parties all the time. i had some hectic druggies friends and they gave it to me and I did some lifting to help me pay for it” (boy)

“i’ve experimented with drugs, as have almost all of my friends.. they are often present in the environment I inhabit” (boy)

“I have got class mates that DO TAKE DRUGS and it’s a really scary thought. Many people smoke in my school and do more than just smoking.” (girl)

Drugs seem to be readily available in the majority of senior schools in South Africa.

Not surprisingly, the boys were more knowledgeable about the kind of drugs that were available to teens. Weed definitely seemed the easiest and most common drug to get hold of. Other drugs like cat (lower grade of coke), coke, mandrax (sugars), speed and tik were also mentioned as drugs being exposed to teens.

“I go to school at one of the following four schools – Rondebosch, Westerford, Bishops and Sacks. They are seen as follows – Rondebosch = weed school, Bishops = rich school, Westerford = hard core drug school – (extacy, herion ect) and Sacks =gay school. Drugs are bad in Rondebosch and Westerford.... I know you can buy a matchbox of weed from a rustafarian in claremont (-he has no shame , I have seen him selling in broad daylight and even to POLICE!!!! People smoke weed DURING SCHOOL AND BREAK!!!!” (boy)

“drugs are very popular in schools today, they are so easy to get hold of” (girl)

For those who had been exposed to drugs, they seemed to know exactly what you had to pay for them. Prices ranged from R5 for weed to as much as R450 for coke.

“You pay R450 for PURE coke!!!! Acid is between R50 to bout R200 for one paper but it is hectic u hallucinate crazy things!!!!!!!!!!!! On acid Ive had that” (boy)

“I live in a pretty dodge area and I can get pretty much any drug I want” (boy)

Peer pressure, trying to fit in and be cool and to a lesser extent, family problems, were cited as the main reasons for experimenting with drugs.

“its peer pressure plus some people think to really party you must take drugs” (boy)

There was general consensus that taking drugs is not cool. Alcohol seems to be a more acceptable substance. Most of the teens themselves admitted to drinking, although for most, it was not excessive. It seems that quite a few teens were able to walk into the bottle store themselves and purchase alcohol. Popular drinks mentioned were Alcopops (such as Bacardi Breezer), beer, vodka and lime, ciders and Klippies and Coke.

“If you are talking about alcohol as a drug then let me tell you that the majority of teens are abusing alcohol. Yes, I drink” (girl)

“to get the dop isn’t a problem, lots of my friends look older than they are” (girl)

Quite a few teens mentioned that experimenting with drugs starts as young as 13. A few girls believe that the reason 13 is the magical age is because a lot of children are then in Grade 7, which in many instances is the top grade of a junior school. They feel that this gives them the licence to start drinking as it looks cool.

A few teens were really against drinking which stemmed from their personal experiences with their parents drinking. Reading between the lines, some parents’ weaknesses have really hurt their children.

“My parents drink lot and you tend to stay away when you see what happens when people drink to much” (girl)

“My parents drink a lot .. I wouldn’t want to be like them so I stay away from alcohol” (boy)

“If their lives fall apart, so do ours” (boy)

We asked the teens how easy it is to become addicted to drugs. For most, they felt it would be easy to become addicted. This reason alone was one of the main reasons some teens hadn’t experimented.

“I myself have no experience, so I wouldn’t know how addictive it is.. but I do know how addicted I am to chocolate, so if it is anything as addictive as that, then I don’t wanna try...but part of me wants to know why so many people go crazy over drugs so maybe one day I will try a drug” (girl)

5. Conclusions

Our online research in South Africa was conducted using bulletin boards. Our topic, “issues facing teens in the techno age” covered very sensitive issues such as the use of cellphones and access to pornographic images, as well as the use of and access to drugs and alcohol in teen society. Not only are these issues sensitive, but they are also illegal for the respondents, consisting of girls and boys between 14 and 16 years old. However, despite this, answers received were extremely frank and honest.

We attribute the in-depth responses to the use of bulletin boards and the anonymity associated with online research. The fact that teenagers are familiar and comfortable with this medium provides added integrity to the results.

In our opinion, we question whether such a candid response could have been achieved using face-to-face groups, the traditional qualitative method applied to research emotional topics such as our subject presented to the respondents. This is due to the fact that many teenagers do not want to appear ‘uncool’ in front of their peers, and are therefore reluctant to open up in a face-to-face group discussion. Online research does not enable moderators to interpret body language, but there are many other alternatives that respondents can use to express themselves, such as colour, bold print and pictures.

It is therefore evident that online qualitative research can play a significant role within selected target markets in South Africa. Such markets include teenagers, students, young professionals and higher socio-economic groups. In our opinion, online research should not replace traditional face-to face qualitative methods. Rather, it presents an opportunity to expand the total qualitative category and can be seen as another research medium to extract information from target respondents in appropriate situations.

As the internet expands its reach, the online target market is expected to increase. Our findings are in keeping with research markets in the US and elsewhere in the world, where technology is advancing at a rapid rate, and software is becoming more user-friendly, reliable and sophisticated.

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Steve August	Beyond Bulletin Boards: New Frontiers in Online Qualitative Research	QRCA Annual Conference 2005

<http://www.focusgroupsonline.net/pubd.html>