

## Confident Young Adults

### Communication and social, public, and civic engagement

Emily Best, Christina Clark and Irene Picton

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In an increasingly digital world where opinions and values appear more and more polarised, engaging in debate may feel volatile or dangerous. Almost every day on Twitter, the opinions of a public figure will be criticised, screenshotted, deleted and discussed across news and other social media platforms. Meanwhile, any individual's opinions, whether on Twitter and other social media platforms or comments on a news website, can be subject to abuse or trolling, while it is equally easy for misinformation and misrepresentation to incite anger when faced with dissenting opinions. This also then feeds into daily life, as social interactions can be subject to the same polarisation and sensitivity that can be seen online.

It is therefore crucial that young adults feel confident in making their opinions heard and feel empowered to engage with discussions and debates as stakeholders in society. Equally, where social and news medias have the power to amplify and warp opinions and ideas to a polarising extent, young adults should feel able and qualified to challenge and respond to ideas, whether in social or familial conversations, at work or through civic engagement.

Literacy skills are key to building confidence in communication. The National Literacy Trust's definition of literacy emphasises the role of literacy in supporting effective communication<sup>1</sup>. This includes the critical and creative literacy skills needed for the digital age and acknowledges the importance of literacy in enabling individuals to reach their full potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/information/what-is-literacy/>

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To explore how literacy and confidence interrelate and how they impact social and civic engagement, the National Literacy Trust commissioned Savanta ComRes to survey 2,555 young adults aged 16 to 30 in February 2022. They were asked about their confidence in communicating in a range of settings, such as with friends and family, and in the workplace, and whether confidence is different on different modes of communication such as speaking face to face or on the telephone or on social media. We also asked how confident they feel speaking about a range of topics, both in terms of sharing their opinions as well as challenging the opinions of others.

This report explores the ways in which the young adults surveyed communicate and engage with the world in different ways. We looked at a range of different issues, with some important themes emerging around political, civic and social engagement. Politics for younger age groups was a key consideration: in the 2019 General Election, the turnout was predicted to be 47% amongst voters aged 18-24, compared with 74% of those aged 65 and above (Ipsos, 2019). Meanwhile, research has suggested that low voter turnout for younger citizens does not necessarily equate to disengagement, and rather while they might feel disenchanting by formal politics and their ability to effect change, they are aware of and have strong feelings about more 'cause-oriented' politics and activism in other ways (Henn and Foard, 2012). It is therefore important to consider how the young adults surveyed here spoke specifically about politics but also about inherently (but perhaps not explicitly) political issues, such as COVID-19 and climate.

Furthermore, this report highlights a keen awareness of the potential volatility of debate in different settings. For example, a high number of respondents, particularly women, cite a fear of getting things wrong or of being judged as a factor affecting their confidence. It is useful to consider the ways in which young adults might feel reluctant to express or challenge opinions in the context of critical literacy. In 2021, for instance, we found that 3 in 5 (59.0%) young people agreed that seeing other people's points of view online helped them to form their own opinion on different topics, and more than half (52.1%) said they used the internet to talk to people from places or backgrounds that were different from their own (Picton et al, 2022).

## Key findings

### General confidence

- In general, most young adults felt confident expressing their opinions, with 1 in 3 (32.0%) feeling very confident and over 1 in 2 (53.4%) feeling somewhat confident
- A slightly higher percentage of young men than young women said they felt confident overall (87.3% vs 84%)
- Nearly 9 in 10 (88.3%) young adults felt confident expressing their opinions in direct written communications, such as email or text message, while 3 in 4 felt confident speaking face to face (74.5%). 7 in 10 felt confident writing on social media (71.1%) and speaking on the telephone (68.6%). Only half (50.1%) of all the young adults felt confident speaking on social media, such as on Facebook Live or TikTok

## Speaking about different issues and challenging opinions

- 7 in 10 young adults felt confident expressing opinions about education (71.9%) and COVID-19 (70.8%), while 3 in 5 felt confident expressing opinions about climate (57.4%) and gender (56.1%). However, only 2 in 5 (44.1%) felt confident expressing opinions about politics
- There was little difference by gender for confidence in speaking about education, or COVID-19. However, markedly more young men than women felt confident speaking about politics (52.1% vs 36.7%) and climate (65% vs 50.4%), whereas slightly more young women than men felt confident speaking about gender (59.3% vs 51.9%)
- While nearly 9 in 10 (88.3%) young adults felt confident communicating via written formats (including email, text messages and letters), just over half (55.6%) felt confident writing a letter to challenge someone's opinion or action, such as writing to an MP or a company

## Contributing factors

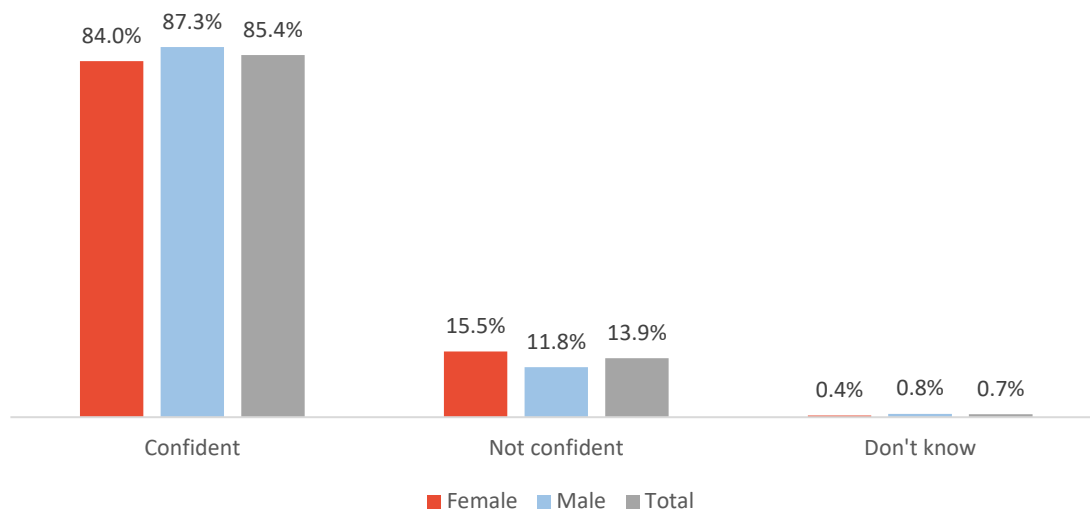
- 2 in 5 (38.1%) young adults said that fear of saying the wrong thing contributed to a lack of confidence when expressing their opinions
  - There was a marked difference by gender in this regard, with almost half (47.4%) of young women identifying this compared with 1 in 4 (27.4%) young men
- Around a quarter of young adults said that their mental health or wellbeing (26.7%), a fear of being judged (24.1%) or lack of knowledge on a particular subject (22.9%) had an impact on their confidence
  - More than twice as many young women (32.9%) as men (14.4%) said that other people being involved and/or a fear of being judged was a contributing factor

## Confidence expressing opinions in general

We asked young adults to tell us how confident they felt expressing their opinions. As shown in Figure 1, most young adults felt confident to some extent, with 1 in 3 feeling very confident and over half feeling somewhat confident. Just over 1 in 8 said they did not feel very confident, and hardly any said they did not feel at all confident or that they did not know.

While there are some areas in which a clear gender divide can be found, which will be explored in more detail later in this report, there is very little difference between young men and women with regards to overall confidence, with just 3.3 percentage points more men than women saying they feel confident.

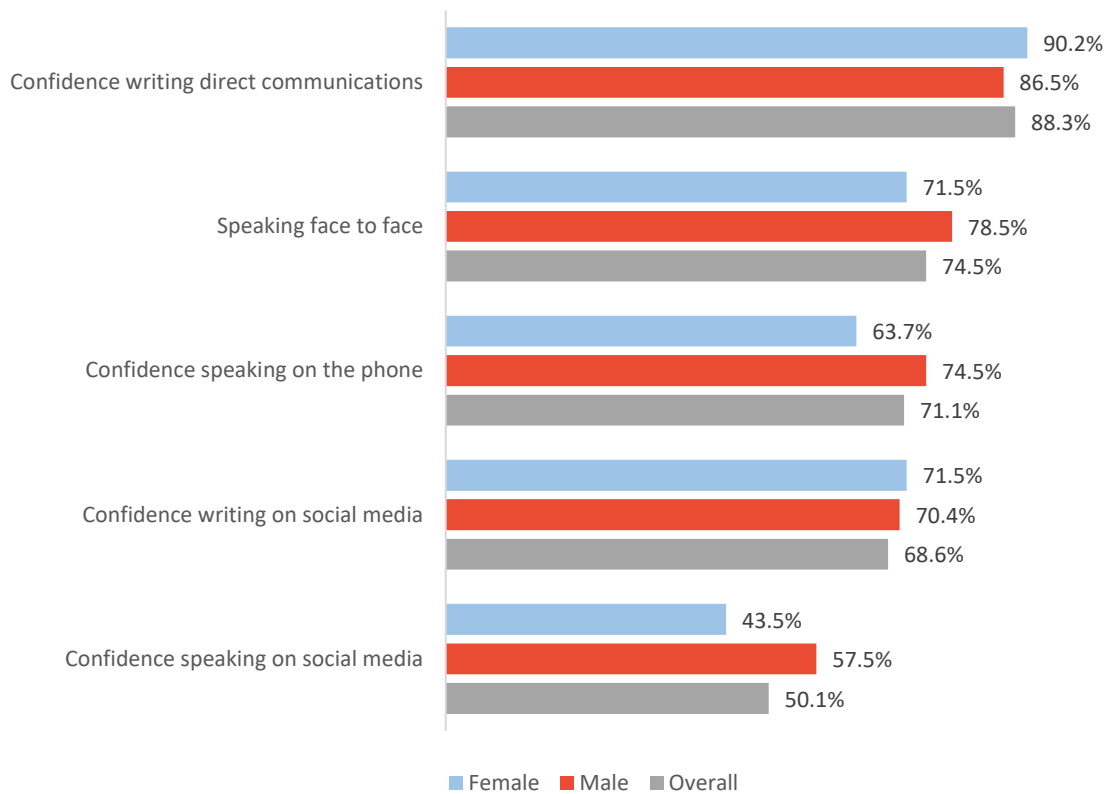
**Figure 1: Young adults' overall confidence expressing opinions divided by gender**



We also asked young adults to tell us how confident they felt expressing their opinions on a range of different platforms. As shown in Figure 2, nearly 9 out of 10 felt confident expressing their opinions in direct written communications, such as emails or text messages, while around 7 in 10 felt confident speaking face to face, writing on social media and speaking on the telephone. Around half of all the young adults felt confident speaking on social media, such as on Facebook Live or TikTok.

As can be seen in Figure 2, there was little differentiation across different platforms, although young men were slightly higher in all areas except direct communications. The only area where the difference was notable, where fewer young women than men felt confident, was in speaking on social media, where there was a 14-percentage-point difference.

**Figure 2: Young adults who feel confident expressing their opinions in different settings by gender**

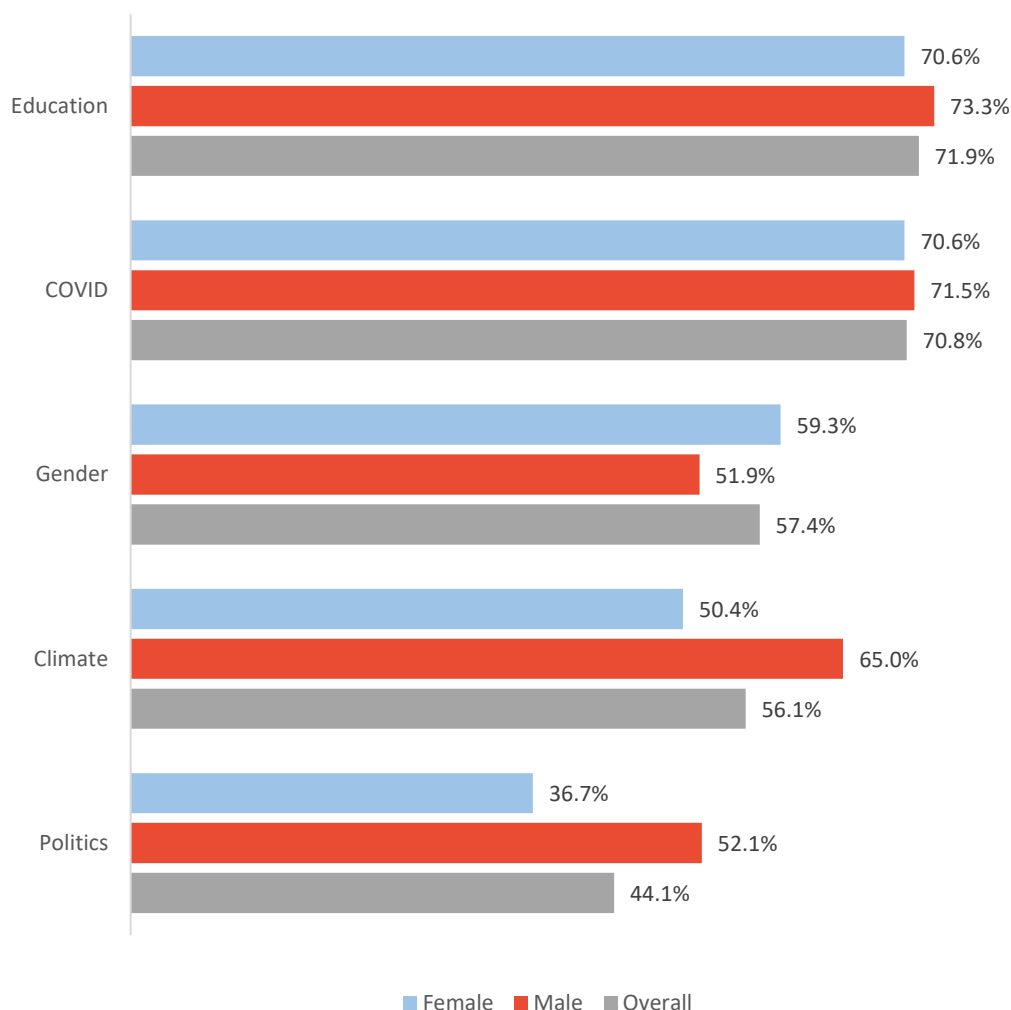


## Speaking about and challenging different issues

### Expressing opinions on different issues

As shown in Figure 3, only around 2 in 5 of all young adults we spoke to felt confident speaking about politics. Conversely, over 7 in 10 felt confident speaking about education and COVID. Meanwhile, between half and 3 in 5 felt confident discussing climate or gender. However, there was more of a marked difference by respondents’ gender for some issues than for others. There was little difference for education or COVID-19, and gender was the only issue where slightly more young women than men felt confident expressing their opinions. Meanwhile, there was a more marked difference for speaking about climate issues with just half of young women feeling confident in this regard compared with nearly 7 in 10 men. Moreover, there was a very clear difference when it came to politics, with fewer than 2 in 5 young women feeling confident compared with just over half of the men.

**Figure 3: Confidence about speaking about different issues by gender**

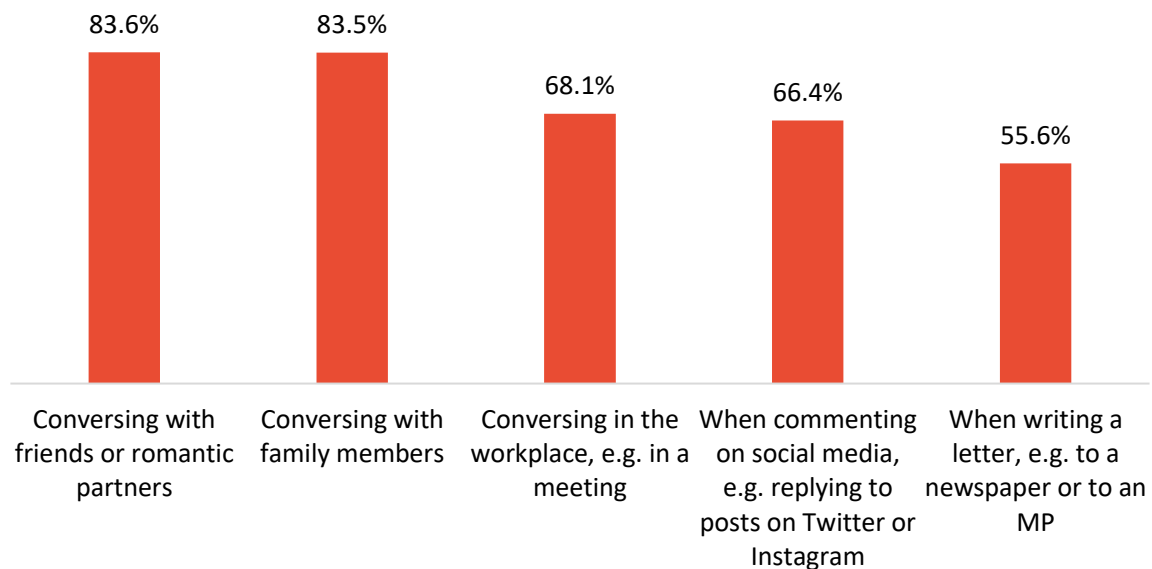


### **Challenging ideas and opinions**

We asked young adults how confident they would feel if they read or heard something they disagreed with, challenging it in different contexts. This might involve directly challenging an opinion in the moment or discussing something they read or heard elsewhere that they disagreed with.

As shown in Figure 4, just over 4 in 5 young adults said they would feel confident doing this with friends or romantic partners and with family. There was then a drop for those who felt confident having such conversations in the workplace and when commenting on or engaging with social media. This dropped further (to just over half) for those who felt confident writing an important letter, such to a newspaper or their MP.

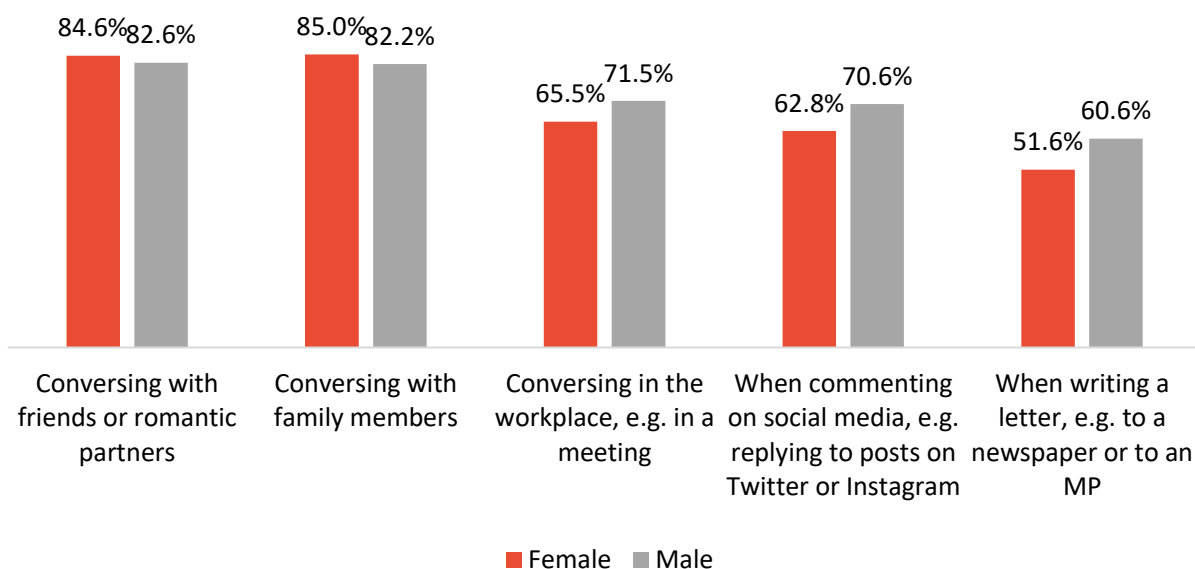
**Figure 4: Young people who are confident challenging things they read or hear that they disagree with via different channels**



### Challenging ideas and opinions by gender

Figure 5 shows that slightly more young women than men felt confident expressing disagreement when conversing with friends or romantic partners and with family. However, there was a more marked difference in other aspects, with more young men than women feeling confident conversing in the workplace, on social media or through writing a letter. This was most marked for writing a letter, with more young men than women saying they would feel confident in this regard.

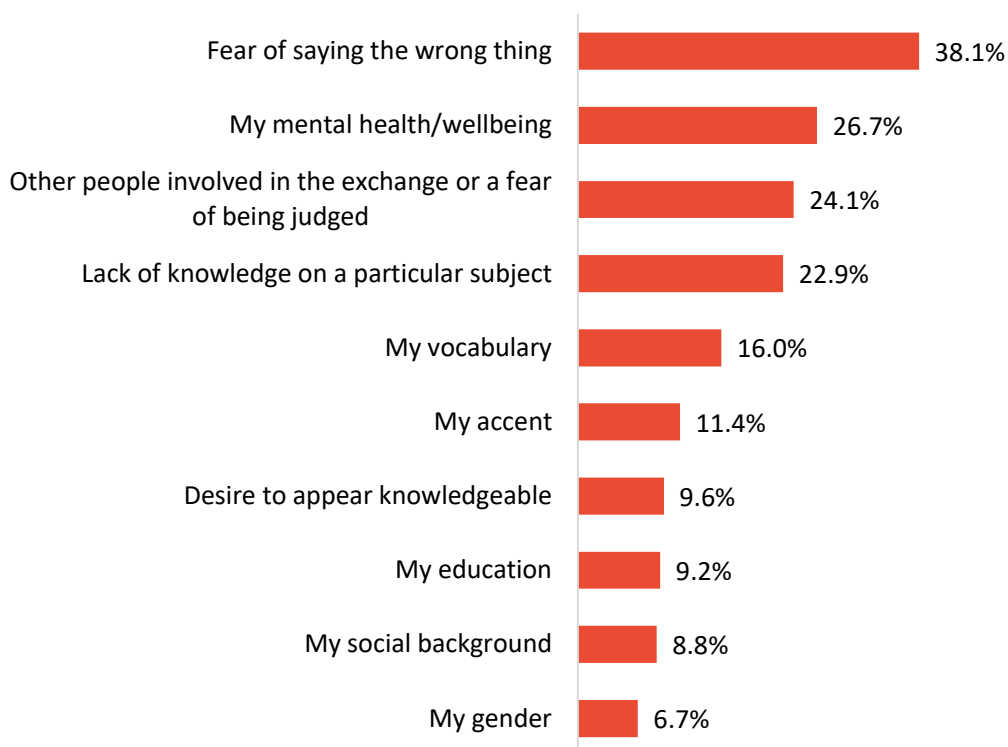
**Figure 5: Confidence expressing disagreement with ideas or opinions in different settings divided by gender**



## Contributing factors

We asked young adults which factors they thought had an impact on when they did not feel confident expressing their opinions. As shown in Figure 6, nearly 2 in 5 young adults said that a fear of saying the wrong thing had an impact on their confidence. Further, around a quarter said that their mental health/wellbeing, other people involved in the exchange, a fear of being judged or a lack of knowledge on a particular subject were factors. Perhaps more encouragingly, fewer said that education, social background or gender had an impact.

**Figure 6: Factors that young adults think have an impact on their confidence when communicating**

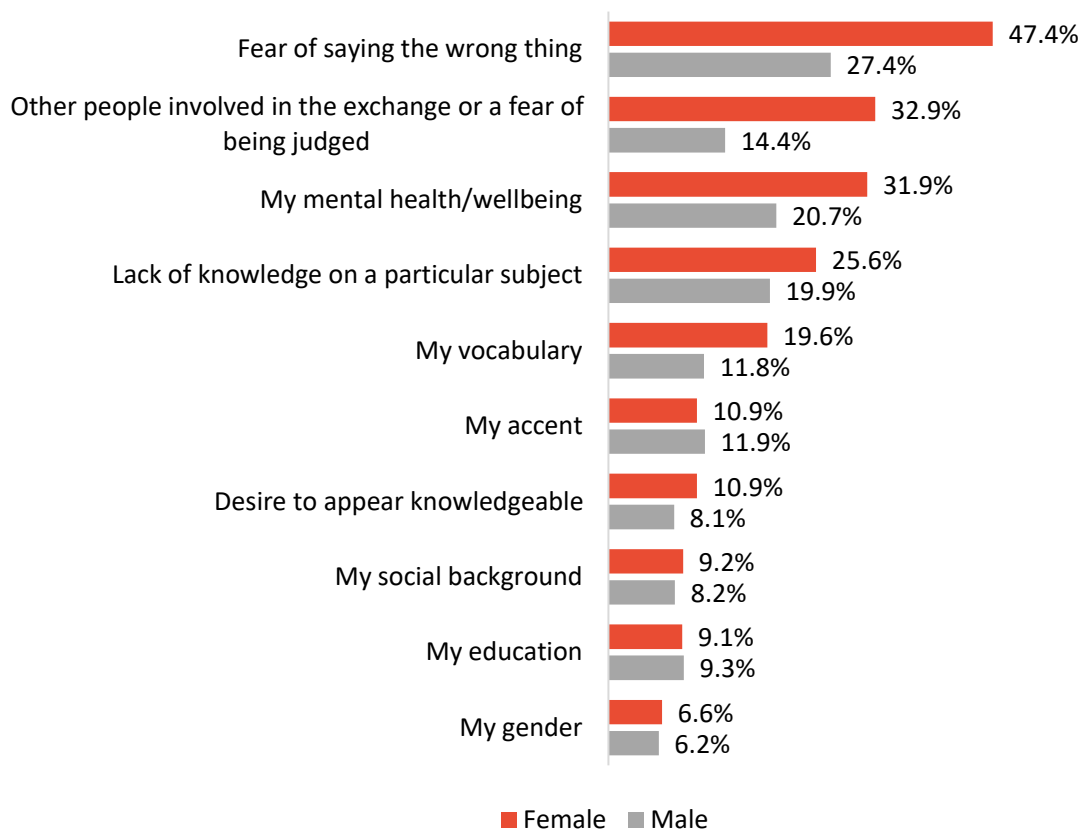


## Contributing factors and gender

Despite only a small fraction of young adults saying that gender was a factor, there was a marked difference in certain areas between what young women and men identified as factors. As shown in Figure 7, nearly half of all young women said that a fear of saying the wrong thing was a factor compared with just over a quarter of young men, and more than twice as many women felt that other people present or a fear of being judged were factors. Furthermore, nearly 1 in 3 young women attributed mental health or wellbeing as a factor compared with just 1 in 5 young men.



**Figure 7: Factors young adults say contribute to low confidence, divided by gender**



Open-ended responses from young adults also suggested that subject or topic knowledge was an important factor in increasing confidence, along with not being concerned about getting things wrong.

“Knowledge of the subject in question is key as the less I know the less confident I will be.”

“Knowing more about the situation and topic I am talking to people about.”

“Not having a fear of sounding silly/saying the wrong thing.”

Conversely, a fear of getting things wrong or a fear of judgement, backlash, or abuse from those with differing viewpoints were mentioned frequently as factors influencing poor confidence, suggesting that these are persistent concerns:

“If people were less judgemental.”

“Being in an environment where people are willing to be objective and listen to differing viewpoints.”

“Fear of other people being rude and nasty or being bullied or being trolled online.”

## Conclusion

Engaging with social and political issues can be an alienating experience for those who lack confidence. This report shows that while young adults' confidence in expressing opinions is reassuringly high overall, there are significant differences when discussing specific issues. In particular, there is a persistent gender gap when discussing politics and/or climate, where fewer women feel confident than men. Arguably, these are both traditionally male-dominated areas, although there are more women represented in politics and in political comment than in previous generations.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, young women are still underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects where discussions around climate might be modelled.<sup>3</sup> Crucially from a communication perspective, all young adults should have the vocabulary and confidence to speak about and engage with these topics that will have such a significant impact on the lives of future generations.

This report also shows that young women are especially conscious of criticism or getting things wrong when expressing their opinion. Further research into this area, exploring how young women might feel more confident in expressing their own opinions and engage in debate, and exploring why they feel more conscious of criticism, could be beneficial in increasing confidence and civic engagement for these groups. Similarly, while lower overall, more young women than young men cite lack of knowledge on a particular subject as an area of concern, perhaps linking back to a fear of criticism. These findings highlight the need for further exploration of communication in the context of critical literacy, ensuring that young adults have the confidence and vocabulary to navigate and engage in debate in respectful and mindful ways.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "Women in Politics and Public Life", House of Commons Library, 2022

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "Women in STEM", <https://www.stemwomen.com/women-in-stem-percentages-of-women-in-stem-statistics#:~:text=According%20the%20recent%20UCAS%20data,in%20the%20UK%20are%20women>

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Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

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