

Young adults' communication and the gender gap

Exploring young adults' confidence communicating about their mental wellbeing, work and participation in society

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In the UK, a persistent opportunity gap cuts across gender, socioeconomic background and education. Indeed, an international index benchmarking gender parity across economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, ranked the United Kingdom 22nd across these criteria (World Economic Forum, 2022). In detail, the UK ranks 24th for political empowerment, 33rd for educational attainment and 44th in economic participation and opportunity.

The report's introduction outlines how current economic factors serve only to widen this gap: "The decade of austerity that followed the 2008 Global Financial Crisis constrained sectors that provide the core of social infrastructure, affecting outcomes for families and primary caregivers – often women – during the pandemic. Geopolitical conflict and climate change both impact women disproportionately. In addition, the projected deepening of the current cost-of-living crisis is also likely to impact women more severely than men, as women continue to earn and accumulate wealth at lower levels" (p. 32).

These differences were borne out by the shifts in employment caused by the pandemic: during lockdown, women in the UK were 4.8 percentage points more likely than men to lose their jobs. Moreover, this same study found workers with a university degree were 6.3 percentage points less likely to lose their jobs than those without one (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). Furthermore, because of the disproportionately high numbers of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds losing employment during the pandemic and the reduced access to vital health and wellbeing services, these groups are especially vulnerable.

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We know that literacy is key in tackling these issues, in helping close the gender gap, and in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. We know that speaking, a key part of literacy, is crucial for ensuring young people succeed in life, to engage with and to make sense of the world. Children and young people from disadvantaged communities start school at a disadvantage in this respect, and the gap in spoken language between the least and the most advantaged continues through school and into adulthood (Oracy APPG).

To further explore how young adults see the role of communication, in February 2022 the National Literacy Trust commissioned Savanta ComRes to survey 2,555 young adults aged 16 to 30, asking them about their confidence in communicating in a range of settings. We asked how confident they felt overall in expressing their opinions, how confident they felt expressing them in different scenarios and on a range of different topics, and what factors they felt influenced their confidence in this area.

Having seen some differentiation across their responses by gender and social grade, this report focuses on men and women aged 24-30,¹ exploring how they rate their confidence communicating their feelings and opinions in a range of contexts, and consider how this might affect their participation in society, their wellbeing, and their work opportunities. As outlined below, gaps start to emerge when young adults' gender (male or female) and social grade (ABC1 vs C2DE) are combined to show the most and the least confident members of society.²

Key findings

Confidence overall

- Nearly 9 in 10 (86.4%) young adults aged 24-30 felt confident or very confident expressing their opinions.³
- ABC1 men had the highest level of communication confidence (90.5%), while C2DE women had the lowest (83.0%). The percentage of C2DE women who lacked confidence overall was twice as high as the percentage of ABC1 men (16.7% vs 8.6%).
- Writing on social media seems to be more of a leveller than other formats: where notably fewer C2DE women than ABC1 men feel confident expressing their opinions

¹ Women n = 750, men n = 560. We also had 6 young adults identify another way and 5 who preferred not to identify their gender. We also measured against ethnicity, sexuality and geographical location, although the sample sizes in these groups became too small to warrant significant analysis. A discussion of how these groupings might be explored further is included at the end of this report.

² Social grade is calculated based on occupation. Those classed as ABC1 will have come under high managerial, administrative or professional e.g. doctor, lawyer, medium/large company director (50+ people) (A), intermediate managerial, administrative or professional e.g. teacher, manager, accountant (B), supervisor, administrative or professional e.g. policeman, nurse, secretary, self-employed (C1), or student (C1). C2DE covers skilled manual worker e.g. mechanic, plumber, electrician, lorry driver, train driver (C2), semi-skilled or unskilled manual worker e.g. waiter, factory worker, receptionist, labourer (D), house-wife/house-husband, unemployed or retired (E).

³ Where in this report we compare young men and young women, we will just say 'men' and 'women' (alongside other qualifiers such as social grade where necessary).

face to face (71.7% vs 83.6%) and on the telephone (63.2% vs 75.3%), there is much less of a difference around posting on social media. In fact, very slightly more C2DE women than ABC1 men feel confident in this regard (71.7% vs 70.7% of ABC1 men).

- However, notably fewer women from C2DE backgrounds than men from ABC1 backgrounds feel confident challenging the opinions of others through engaging on social media (59.3% vs 73.6% of ABC1 men)

Communication and wellbeing

- Around three quarters of young adults feel confident communicating their feelings to their friends (76.2%), family (73.7%) or romantic partner (76.9%) if they feel unhappy, anxious or worried. This means that around 1 in 4 young adults do not feel confident communicating their feelings to these groups.
 - Perhaps more worryingly, only around 3 in 5 (62.8%) young adults in this situation feel confident communicating their feelings to a healthcare professional, and just over half (51.9%) would feel confident communicating them to a work colleague.
- While overall differences are relatively low, except for at work (see below), a consistently higher number of men than women say they feel confident communicating their feelings in every setting, except for with a romantic partner (79.9% of women compared with 73.2% of men).
- Around 4 in 5 young adults from all genders and social grades said that better mental wellbeing would improve their confidence.

Communication and the workplace

- More women than men overall felt that confidence has an impact on their career (78.5% of women vs 74.9% of men).
 - While the gender gap is slight overall, it is wider for young adults from C2DE than from ABC1 backgrounds (7.1 percentage points vs 1.8 percentage points).
- Open-ended comments around career progression suggest that young adults are held back by lack of confidence in interviews and in engaging with senior colleagues.
- Returning to wellbeing, just 2 in 5 (44.7%) C2DE women said they would feel confident communicating their feelings to a work colleague if they were unhappy, anxious, or worried compared with 3 in 5 (58.6%) ABC1 men.
- Just 3 in 5 (62.3%) women from C2DE backgrounds feel confident challenging opinions in the workplace compared with nearly 3 in 4 (73%) men from ABC1 backgrounds.
 - In addition to those that said they didn't know (5.5%), 1 in 3 (32.2%) of women in this group did not feel confident in this area.

Communication and society

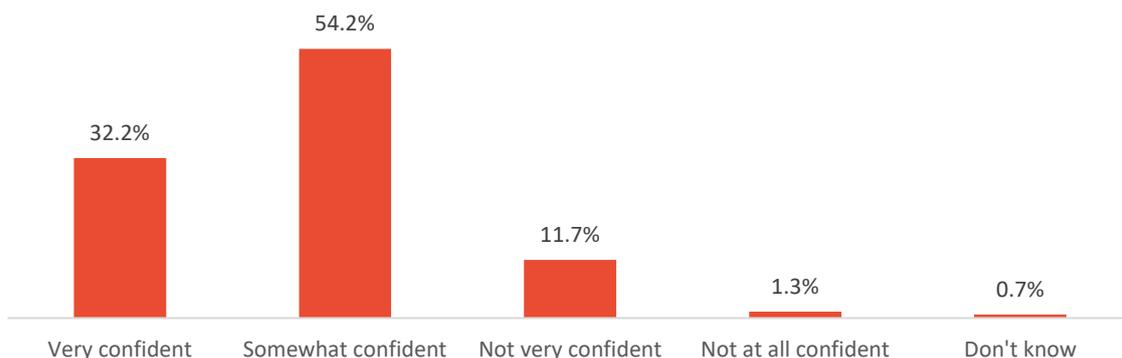
- Around 4 in 5 young adults said their confidence expressing opinions would be increased if environmental factors were improved, such as a more respectful environment (82.3%), less pressure to get things right (82.2%) and different societal expectations (78.9%).
 - In all the above, more young women than young men said that these factors would improve their confidence.

- A more respectful environment: 85.3% of women vs 78.7% of men
 - Less pressure to get things right: 85.6% of women vs 77.9% of men
 - Different societal expectations: 82.3% of women vs 74.8% of men
- Where fewer C2DE women feel confident overall, when asked what would make them feel more confident, they align more closely with ABC1 women than with C2DE men, suggesting that the gender gap is felt more keenly than the social advantage gap. For example, 80% of C2DE women feel that different societal expectations would make them feel more confident compared with 84% of ABC1 women, 77.7% of C2DE men and 73.1% of ABC1 men.
- Nearly 9 out of 10 young adults are confident challenging the opinions of their family (85.6%) and friends (85.2%), whereas just over 3 in 5 (65.4%) feel confident challenging opinions on social media. There is a marked difference between ABC1 men and C2DE women regarding challenging opinions on social media with 73.6% of ABC1 men feeling confident compared with 59.3% of C2DE women.

Confidence overall

We asked all young adults to rate their confidence in expressing their opinions overall on a scale of very confident to not at all confident or don't know. As shown in Figure 1, nearly 1 in 3 said that they were very confident and just over half said that they were somewhat confident expressing their opinions. Only 1 in 8 said that they were not very confident expressing their opinions and hardly any said that they were not at all confident or that they didn't know.

Figure 1: Overall confidence of young adults aged 24-30 in expressing opinions



Gender and social grade

Slightly fewer young women than young men felt confident expressing their opinion in the workplace, with 85.2% of young women compared with 88.6% of young men saying they felt either very confident or confident. However, the difference between young women and men is increased when we also explore social grade. As shown in Figure 2, fewer young women from lower social grades (C2DE) said that they feel confident expressing their opinions

compared with young women from higher social grades (ABC1). Overall, more young men from higher social grades (ABC1) said that they feel confident expressing their opinions compared with young men of lower social grades (C2DE). Considering this as a scale from the most to the least confident, as shown in Figure 3, there is a more notable difference: the group with the lowest confidence is C2DE women, of whom 16.7% said that they did not feel confident expressing their opinions, compared with just 8.6% of ABC1 men.

Figure 2: Overall confidence in expressing opinions by social grade and gender

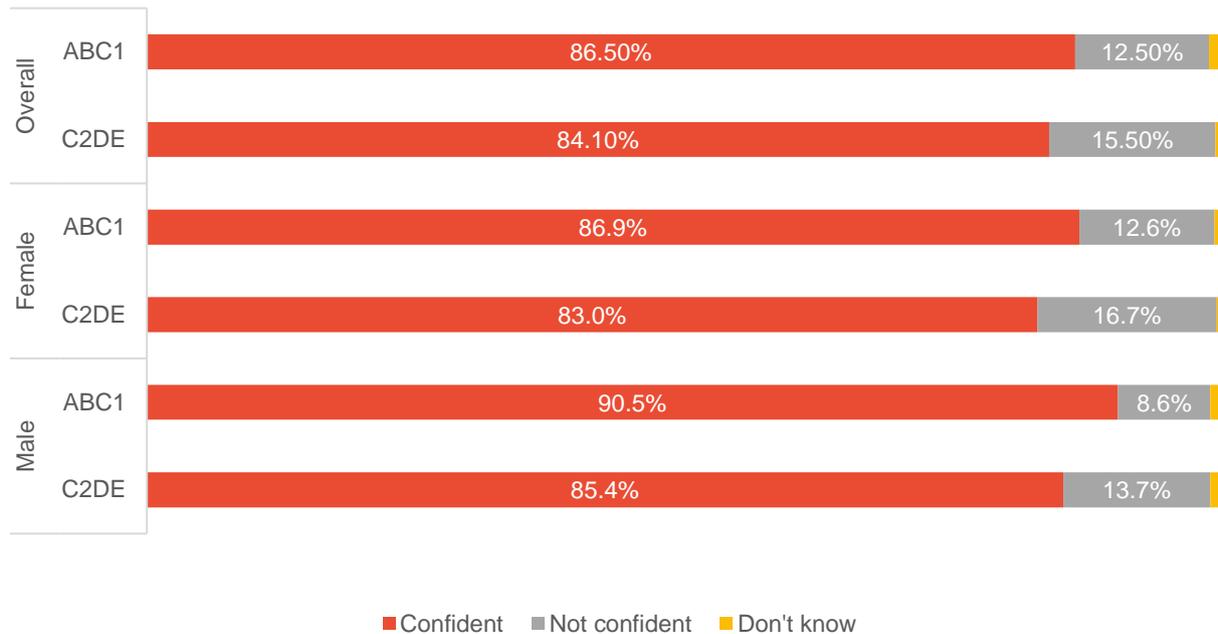


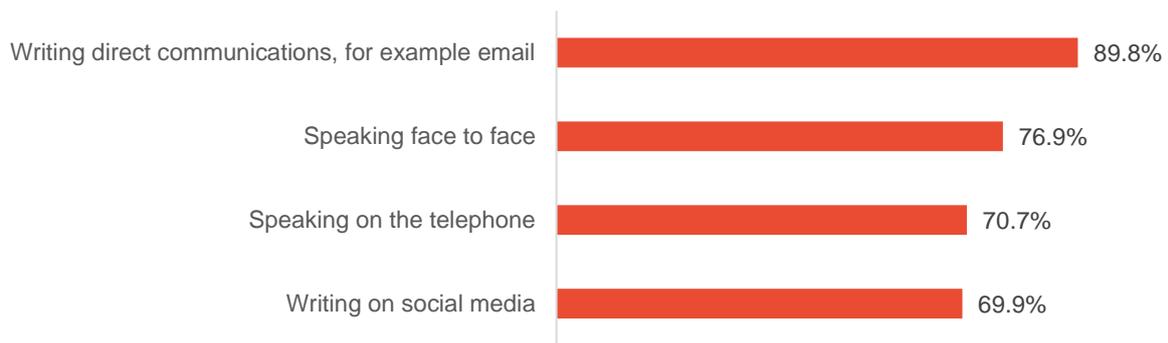
Figure 3: Ordering of gender and social grade from lowest to highest number of young adults who feel confident expressing their opinions



Confidence communicating on different platforms

We asked young adults how confident they felt expressing opinions on different platforms including writing direct communications such as emails and letters, speaking face to face and on the telephone, and writing on social media, such as tweets or blog posts. As shown in Figure 4, 9 out of 10 young adults felt confident writing direct communications while three quarters felt confident speaking face to face. Around 7 in 10 felt confident speaking on the telephone and writing on social media.

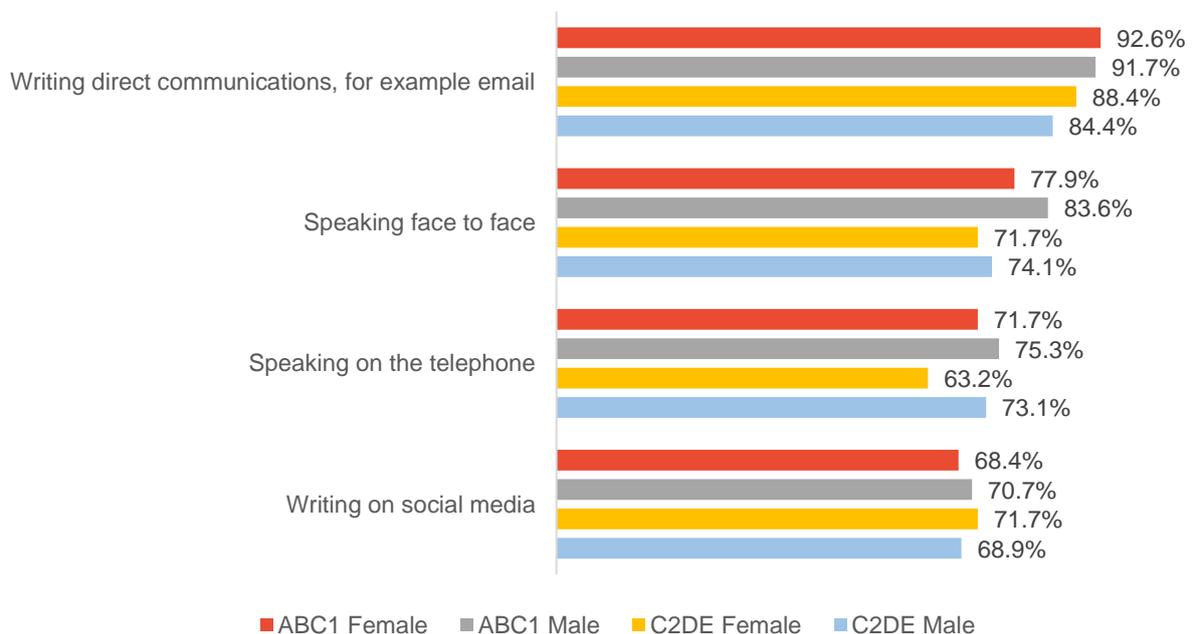
Figure 4: Young adults who feel confident communicating on different platforms



Communicating on different platforms across gender and social grade

As shown in Figure 5, there is some differentiation across social grade and gender for different platforms. These are perhaps most marked for speaking face to face and speaking on the telephone, where the percentage of ABC1 men who feel confident on these platforms is over 10 percentage points higher than for C2DE women. Meanwhile, the percentages are much more even for writing on social media, where a slightly higher percentage of C2DE women than ABC1 men feel confident.

Figure 5: Young adults who feel confident communicating on different platforms by gender and social grade

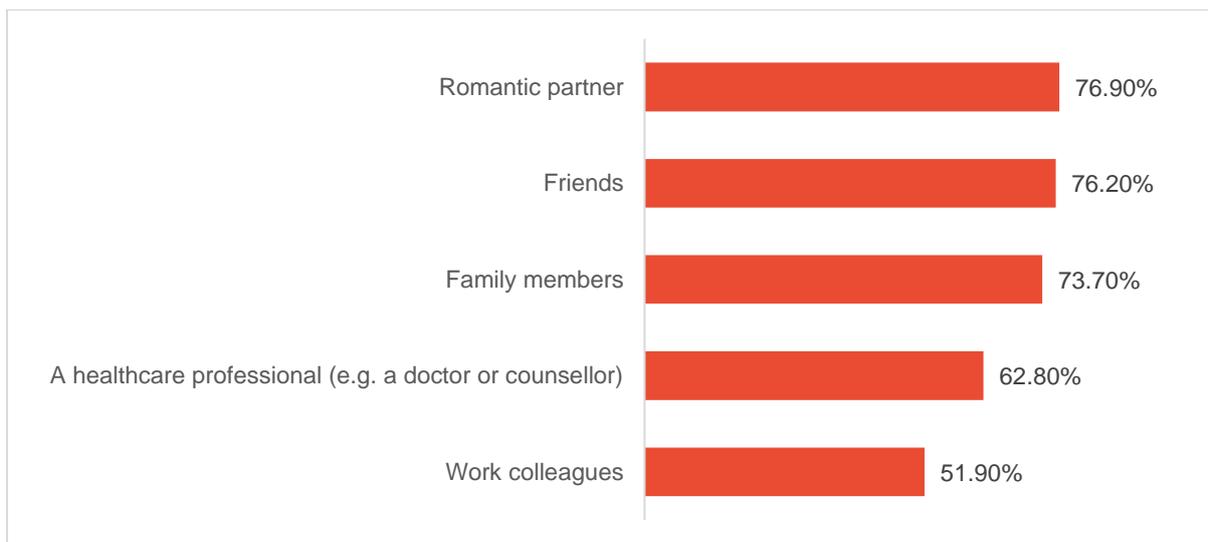


Communication and wellbeing

We asked young adults to say how confident they would feel telling different people if they felt unhappy, anxious or worried. As shown in Figure 6, around three quarters felt confident

speaking to family members, friends and romantic partners. This means that around 1 in 4 young adults do not feel confident communicating their feelings to these groups. Perhaps more worryingly, only around 3 in 5 young adults in this situation feel confident communicating their feelings to a healthcare professional, and just over half would feel confident communicating them to a work colleague. This means that, respectively, 2 in 5 and nearly half of all young adults would not be confident communicating their feelings in a workplace or health setting.

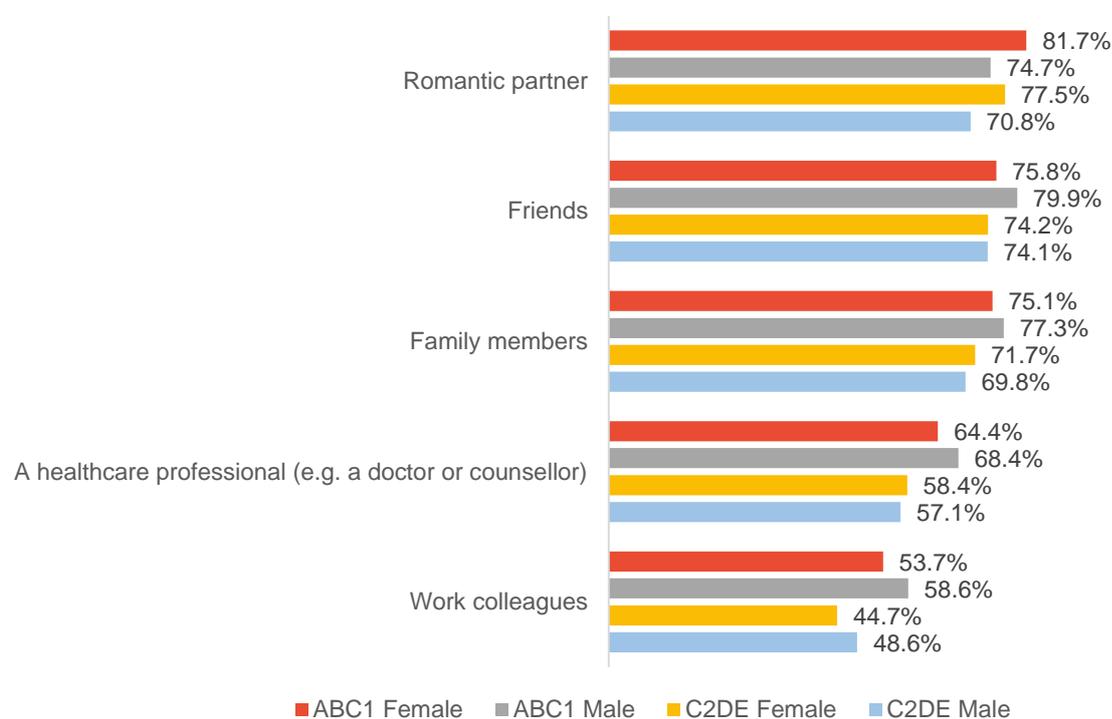
Figure 6: Percentage of young adults who feel confident telling different people if they feel unhappy, anxious or worried



Wellbeing, gender and social grade

As shown in Figure 7, a consistently higher number of men than women say they feel confident communicating their feelings in every setting, except for with a romantic partner (79.9% of women compared with 73.2% of men). The divisions by social grade and gender for family, friends and romantic partners are nevertheless relatively narrow. Meanwhile, there is a clear difference by social grade in those who feel confident speaking to a healthcare professional. The starkest difference is in the workplace, where just over 2 in 5 C2DE women would feel confident sharing these feelings compared with nearly 3 in 5 ABC1 men.

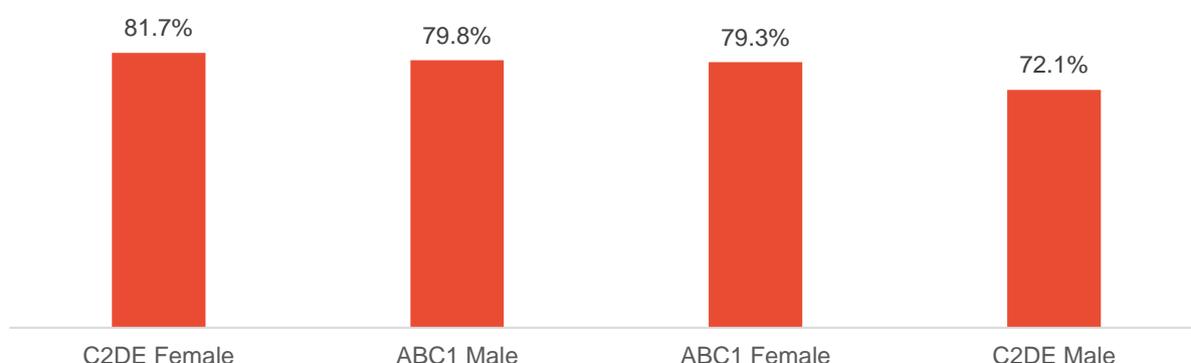
Figure 7: Percentage of young adults who feel confident telling different people if they feel unhappy, anxious or worried, by gender and social grade



Improved wellbeing and improved confidence

The latter part of this report will show findings from asking young adults if a range of different social and environmental factors would improve their confidence. However, we also asked if improved wellbeing and/or mental health would help them feel more confident. As shown in Figure 8, around 4 in 5 men and women from ABC1 backgrounds and women from C2DE backgrounds agreed with this, while slightly fewer (7 in 10) C2DE men felt this way.

Figure 8: Percentage of young adults who said better wellbeing/mental health would improve their confidence



We also found from some open-ended comments that wellbeing was a key issue and/or factor for the people we surveyed:

“I’m too anxious to communicate with people to further my career”

“I just need to improve my mental health”

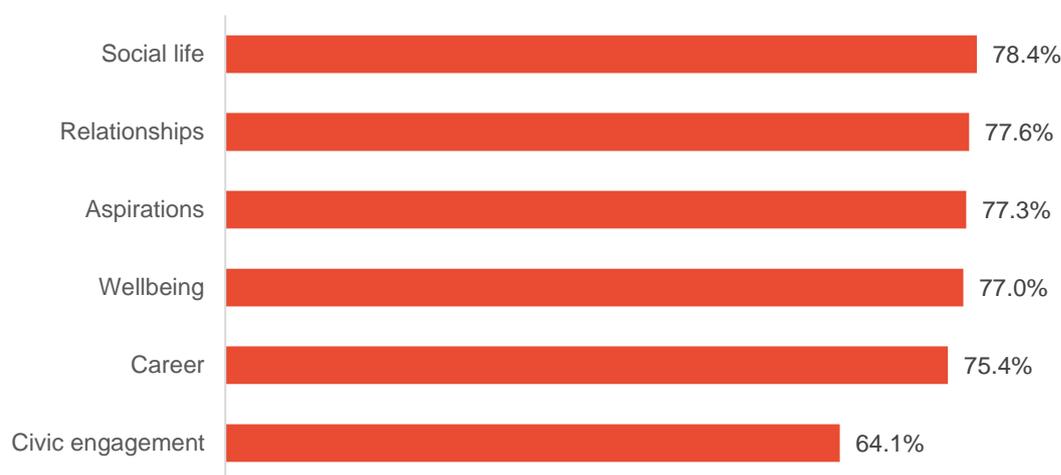
“I’m too shy that I get nervous to try new things or take a leap! I don’t believe in myself”

Communication and the workplace

We asked young adults aged 24-30 to what extent their confidence in communication, or lack thereof, impacted on different aspects of their life. They were asked to select ‘has a great impact’, ‘has some impact’, ‘has very little impact’, ‘has no impact’, ‘don’t know’ or ‘not applicable’.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of young adults who selected ‘has a great impact’ or ‘has some impact’ for each area. As shown, around 3 in 4 young adults noted some impact on their social life (78.4%), relationships (77.6%) aspirations (77.3%), wellbeing (77%) and their careers (75.4%). However, the impact on civic engagement (such as volunteering or voting) is more than 10 percentage points lower than the next lowest (64.1% vs 75.4%) for career.

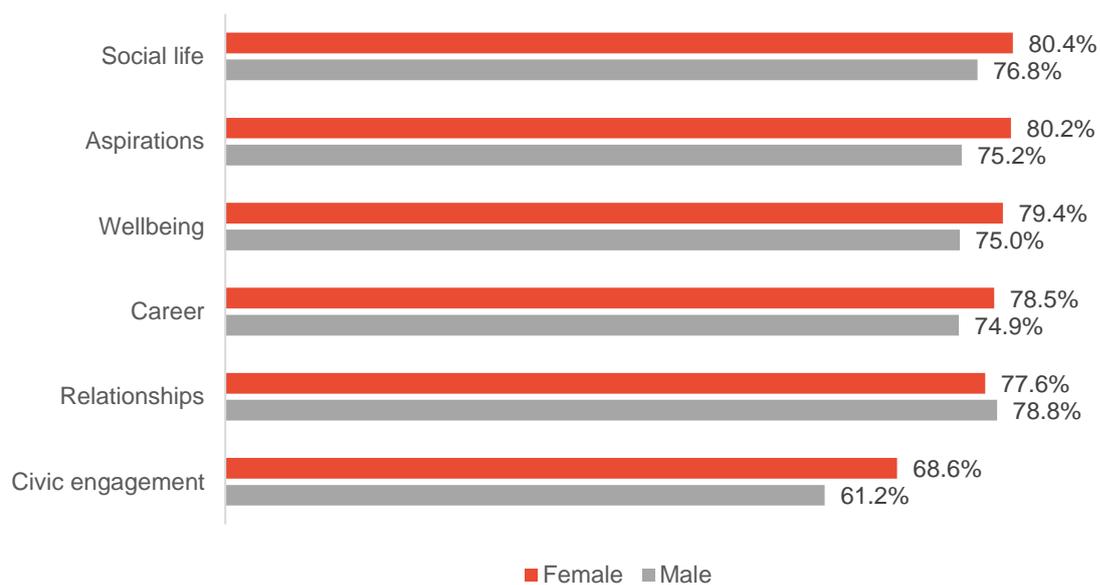
Figure 9: Young adults aged 24-30 who said that confidence had a great impact or some impact on a range of aspects of their lives



Impact and gender

Figure 10 shows the percentage of young men and women who selected ‘has a great impact’ or ‘has some impact’ for the different aspects. As shown here, more women than men selected these for most options, except for relationships where nearly the same percentage of men and women recognised an impact (79% of men vs. 77.9% of women).

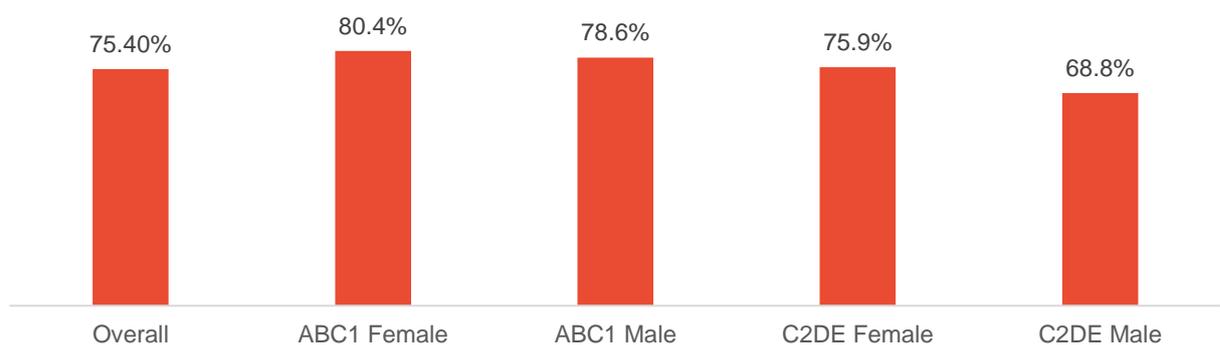
Figure 10: Percentage of young women and men who said that confidence had a great impact or some impact on a range of aspects of their lives



Impact, gender and social grade in the workplace

Focusing on the workplace, this difference is more marked for those from lower social grades, as shown in Figure 11, with a difference of 7.1 percentage points (75.9% of women vs 68.8% of men) compared with a 1.8-percentage-point difference for men and women from ABC1 backgrounds (80.4% vs 78.6%).

Figure 11: Young women and men from different social grades who agree that confidence affects their career



Career aspirations and progression

When we asked young adults to describe in their own words how confidence in communication impacted their lives, many young women discussed their career and/or career progression as an example:

“If you communicate with people you’re more likely to progress in work”

“[I] feel I can’t do the job I love as I’m not confident enough communicating with people”

“I’d like to progress at work I feel I have the skills but sometimes I get nervous talking to superiors”

There were also comments suggesting that women’s aspirations in specific areas might depend on communication skills and confidence:

“I want to be a primary teacher so it is important that I have good communication skills”

“I’d love to start my own business but my confidence stops me”

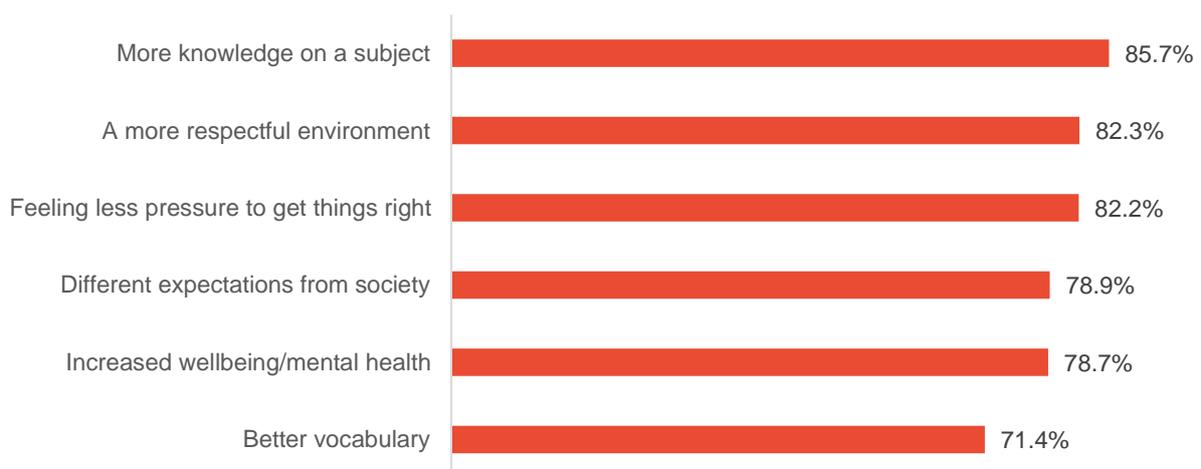
“I want to be a lawyer so this is an essential trait to have”

Communication and society

Social and environmental factors

We asked young adults if their own confidence in expressing opinions would be improved by a range of factors. As shown in Figure 12, agreement with all of these was high, with around 4 in 5 young adults saying their confidence expressing opinions would increase if they had more knowledge on a subject, were in a more respectful environment, if they felt less pressure to get things right, if there were different expectations from society, and if they had better wellbeing and/or mental health. Slightly fewer young adults identified improved vocabulary as a factor, though 7 out of 10 young adults nevertheless identified this as a factor.

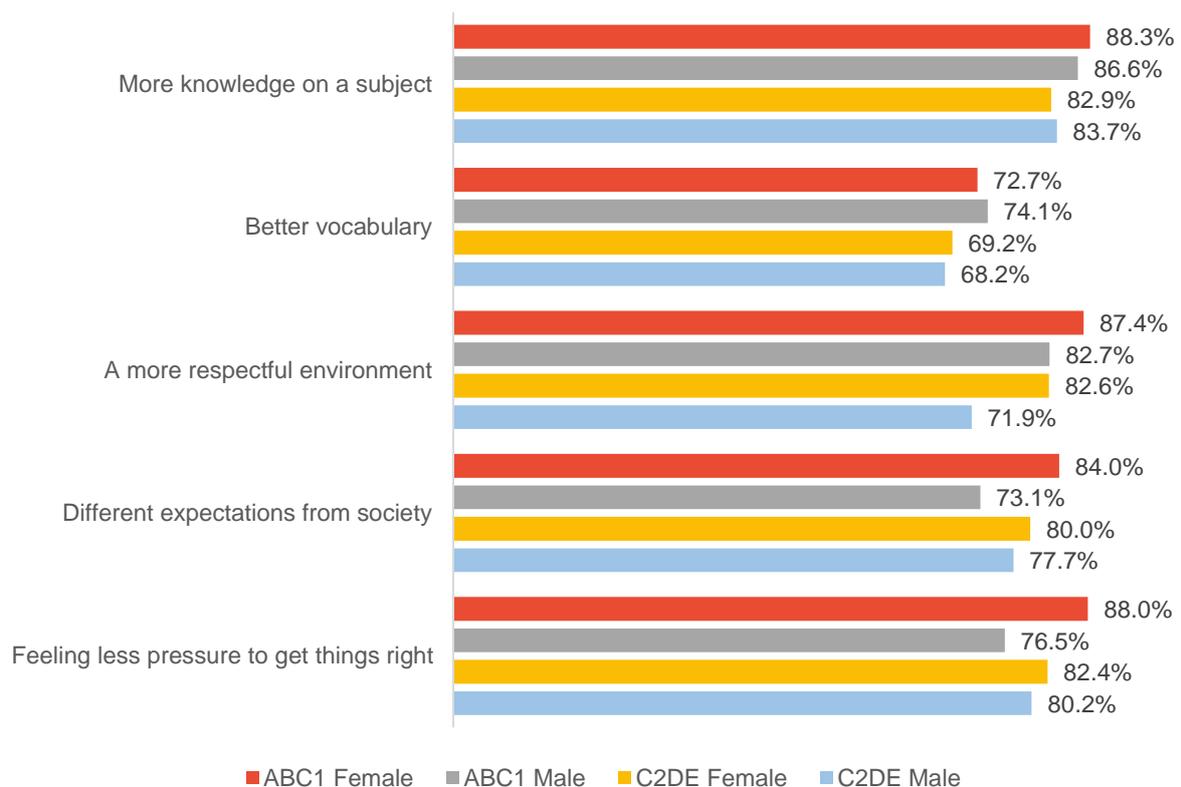
Figure 12: Young adults' agreement that different factors would improve their confidence communicating their opinions



Social and environmental factors, gender and social grade

As shown in Figure 13, in all the above, more young women than young men said that these factors would improve their confidence. However, where fewer C2DE women feel confident overall, when asked what would make them feel more confident, they align more closely with ABC1 women than with C2DE men, suggesting that the gender gap is felt more keenly than the social advantage gap. For example, 80% of C2DE women feel that different societal expectations would make them feel more confident compared with 84% of ABC1 women, 77.7% of C2DE men and 73.1% of ABC1 men.

Figure 13: Young adults' agreement that different factors would improve their confidence communicating their opinions, by gender and social grade



We also asked the young adults to tell us in their own words if there were other factors that might make them feel more confident communicating in any given situation. As the below shows, many women from both social grades saw a more equal or accepting society as a key factor:

“More accepting community” (C2DE)

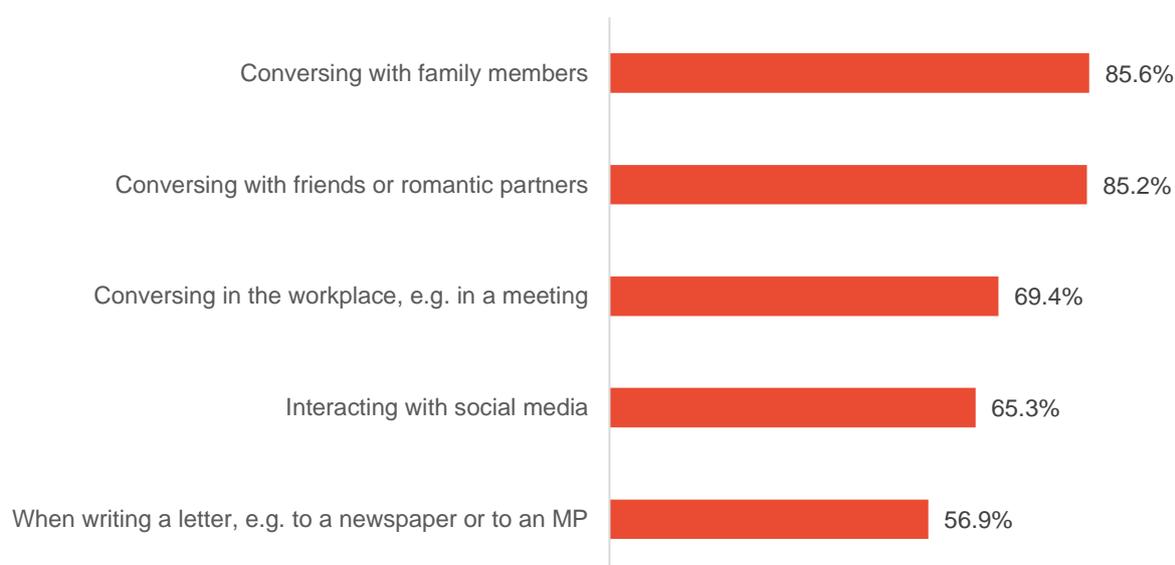
“People listening to women more” (ABC1)

“Not being labelled as the shy, quiet person” (C2DE)

Engaging with and challenging opinions

We asked young adults how confident they would feel in different settings challenging something they heard or read that they disagreed with. As shown in Figure 14, nearly 9 out of 10 young adults are confident challenging the opinions of their family and friends, whereas just over 3 in 5 feel confident challenging opinions on social media. Just over half of the young adults responding said they would feel confident writing a letter to, for example, a newspaper or to their MP.

Figure 14: Young adults who feel confident in different settings challenging something they have read or heard that they disagree with



Challenging opinions, gender and social grade

Looking at gender and social grade (Figure 15), overall confidence shows a similar weighting in terms of different settings, but more of a difference can be seen in the workplace and in terms of writing letters.

Just 3 in 5 women from C2DE backgrounds feel confident challenging opinions in the workplace compared with nearly 3 in 4 men from ABC1 backgrounds (Figure 16). In addition to those that said they didn't know (5.5%), 1 in 3 (32.2%) of women in this group did not feel confident in this area. Further, just under half of women from C2DE backgrounds would feel confident writing a letter to an MP or a newspaper compared with over 3 in 5 men from ABC1 backgrounds (Figure 17). Indeed, while expressing opinions on social media is more of a leveller for different social grades, notably fewer women from C2DE backgrounds than men from ABC1 backgrounds feel confident challenging the opinions of others through engaging on social media (Figure 18).

Figure 15: Young adults who feel confident in different settings challenging something they have read or heard that they disagree with by gender and social grade

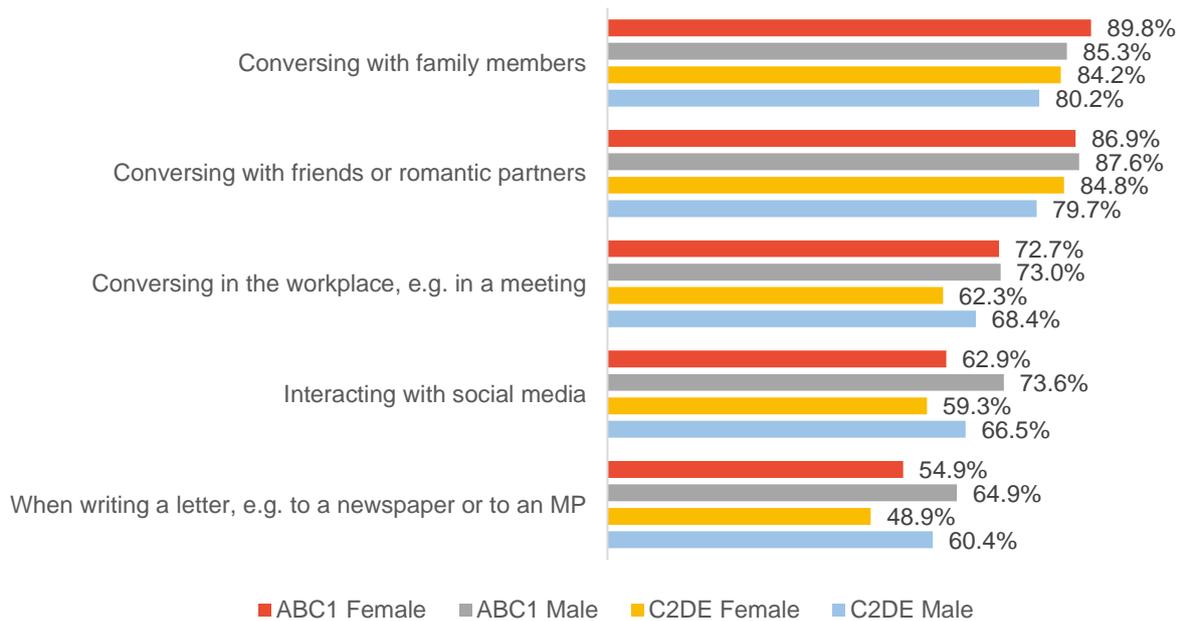


Figure 16: Ordering of gender and social grade from lowest to highest number of young adults who feel confident challenging opinions in the workplace



Figure 17: Ordering of gender and social grade from lowest to highest number of young adults who feel confident challenging opinions on social media



Figure 18: Ordering of gender and social grade from lowest to highest number of young adults who feel confident challenging opinions by writing a letter



Conclusion

The findings from this report suggest that both social grade and gender can have an impact on confidence. Further than this, they highlight that low confidence is an issue in itself. It contributes to wellbeing and participation in society in ways that can only serve to exacerbate the global gender gap. This is particularly worrying at the time of writing, in 2022, where the young UK population is simultaneously emerging from a global pandemic and heading towards further cost-of-living crises that will place yet more pressure on the most disadvantaged members of society. It is crucial that we address the issues outlined here to ensure we can help stop the gap widening even further.

In detail, it is important to note that these differences are most apparent when considering the intersection of social grade and gender. These findings show that young ABC1 men, who are already at an advantage in society, are bolstered by their confidence in other aspects of their life, such as civic and social engagement, wellbeing and employment. C2DE women, meanwhile, who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and by ongoing economic pressures, will be further held back by a lack of confidence.

At the National Literacy Trust our priority is to ensure that all people have the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills they need to succeed in life, which includes confidence in communication. We know that low literacy and poverty are not only linked but are intergenerational, and so as we look to empower the next generation of communicators, it is useful to consider the ways in which we can use these findings to build confidence and skills for the underrepresented and most vulnerable groups.

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