



Interaction and brand management

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Whitepaper

How to Moderate Teens and Tweens

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Teens and tweens part two: How to moderate teens and tweens

In Part One of our series on marketing online to teens and tweens ([An Introduction to Using Community and Interactive Advertising to Engage Tweens / Teens](#)), we talked about the difficulties of reaching this group, and, once you do, how important it is to get the tone, style and content right. How to be informative and responsive without being intrusive; how to engage without patronising. We looked at the 'new rules of engagement' in this fast-changing world, and which brands (in our view) are getting it right.

The market is, unquestionably, growing fast: 90-plus virtual worlds targeting tweens, and 78 targeting teens (according to [Virtual World Management](#)). Add to that thousands of social network fan pages aimed at young people, and an exponentially-growing number of dedicated websites and forums looking to attract the millennials. More on the market can be found in [Part One](#).

What are we dealing with? The psychology and behaviour of teens and tweens online

Teenage brains are still developing – and in fact do so well into their 20s, according to [a report by Laurence Steinberg](#), professor of psychology at Temple University. Steinberg makes the point that this lack of maturity in teenagers results in an "underdeveloped sense of responsibility", "impetuous and ill-considered actions and decisions," and a greater likelihood of being subject to peer pressure and negative influence.

As Steinberg acknowledges, this is only what the parents of most teens will tell you. But apply this principle to an online environment, and you start to understand why young people need to be protected from their own actions as much as from those of outsiders. Steinberg uses a wonderful quote: the teenage brain, he says, is "like a car with a good accelerator but a weak brake. With powerful impulses under poor control, the likely result is a crash".

Anne Collier, writing for [Net Family News](#), comments on this research, making the point that the Internet exposes the journey teens make to work out their own identity in a way that has simply never happened before. Teenagers have always taken risks and explored their boundaries, but now photos are pasted on social networks and file sharing sites, word spreads at the click of a button, and the evidence is online and on record forever. This can, in Collier's words: "be a little unnerving for adults and - again - always has been, but concern multiplies when 1) the adult observer doesn't fully understand the medium; 2) teen behavioral norms, as always, are different from adults'; and 3) the views, behaviors, and images of entire social networks are on display and instantly accessible to adults". In addition, the dramas of teenage life – the emotional highs and lows – become more visible when displayed instantly online. We've all had moments of "I wish I hadn't said that" – particularly in youth – but the online world means that those comments, actions and emotions are all recorded, and can come back to haunt us.

The importance of peer pressure, too, cannot be under-estimated when dealing with teens and tweens. It has far more influence in many cases than adult pressure, no matter how good the parenting (any parent wanting an insight to the world of a tween under pressure from peers should read the brilliant book, '[Bad Influence](#)' by William Sutcliffe). Teens are constantly seeking validation from their peers, and affirmations of popularity as a kind of competition – what child can really have 1000 'friends' as their Facebook status would suggest? They will follow brands that give them social currency: credibility in the eyes of their peers, that might come from wearing the

right label, listening to the right music, or being seen in the right places. It will rarely come from a parent.

This is the beginning of creating their own space in the world; a sense of community with their peers. Social researcher, danah boyd (sic), in an interview with Kate Sheppard on "[what adults should know about kids online networking](#)", says her research shows that groups of marginalised children use these communities to compensate for a lack of community offline.

But there are also some incredibly positive stories about how online social networking can help children. They can play a role in emotional wellbeing, according to [research by Louis Leung](#), PhD. Associate Professor & Director of the Center for Communication Research at the School of Journalism & Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Analysed by The Next Great Thing (NGT), Leung's research into 700 8-15-year old Chinese students found that children "use technology to moderate their emotions. That is, when kids in his study found themselves under stress, they interacted with technology to both moderate their moods and access social networks. Through the Internet, they accessed entertainment and information and sought social compensation through recognition and relationship management." It also showed that "consistent with good mental health, they recognized the need to seek help. The more social support a subject was able to access, the less impact stress had on their lives."

Whether gaming - living out fantasy lives online - is ultimately to beneficial or detrimental effect, is open to debate and further research. Tanya Byron, in [Safer Children in a Digital World](#), (the report of the Byron review), wrote:

"However, individuals who are vulnerable due to a poor early attachment experience, may turn to the internet to create a false identity e.g. via an avatar or to create a false profile on a social networking site which will allow them to change their representations of themselves, at least online. This could potentially have an impact on enabling them to work through difficult factors and increase self esteem when all else in their lives is difficult – to experience life as a different person. An important question here is what the impact of this might be on a vulnerable person and whether children's perceptions of themselves in real life are significantly affected by their other fantasy 'selves' which in turn may impact on their behaviour towards themselves and others either positively or negatively."

Online behaviour is different from offline

Children behave differently online to offline. The perceived anonymity offered by the Internet can lead to 'disinhibition', or 'flaming' – expressing thoughts that, if they had to be expressed in person, would be left alone (or at worst recorded in a private diary). The immediacy of the online and mobile world means that private thoughts are broadcast widely, instantly. There is no time lag in IM, Twitter or texting, so no time to consider the consequences of actions. This, coupled with a perceived anonymity – or at least a distance from the subject with whom the child is communicating – leads to a distorted boldness online.

When you understand this, it becomes easier to understand the huge increase in 'sexting' – where mobile users, often teens (and usually girls), send sexually explicit images of themselves across mobile or Internet networks. The US National Campaign to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancy claims that [39 per cent of teens are sending, or posting, 'sexually suggestive' messages](#). Teenagers have always experimented sexually and you could argue that this is just another means of doing that. But the consequences of sexting can be far-reaching. In [an extreme case in Pennsylvania](#), children sending consensual pictures of themselves were accused of possessing and distributing child abuse images (even though they were themselves children – aged between 14 and 17) under laws that are designed to protect children from adult abusers. The children were sentenced to

curfews and community service. But even without the interference of the law, this behaviour can have damaging consequences.

The same principles of disinhibition and flaming apply to bullying online. Children, who as we know can be scarily savage when freed from supervision (think Lord of the Flies here) can be even more cruel when it is done anonymously, or from a distance. It's much easier, particularly when facing peer pressure to do so, to send a bullying text or Facebook message, or set up a Facebook group, where a child doesn't have to show their face. In one case in the US, [teenager Jessica Logan took her own life](#) when sexual images she sent to her boyfriend ended up in the public domain, and bullying followed, with insults posted on her MySpace and Facebook pages. What started as a private action between consenting teenagers ended up ruining lives.

Expert on youth virtual worlds, author and community manager, Izzy Neis, says on her [blog](#) that many children will have had virtual sex presented to them before they are aware of sexuality in the real world. She cites '[bumping' in Club Penguin](#) (an issue that came up a few years ago and has since been rectified) where children are beginning to explore their sexuality (attaching heart symbols to their penguin avatars, and 'bumping' into each other). Neis makes the point that this is often normal behaviour for children, and in the case of Club Penguin and other responsible virtual worlds for children, moderation is used to help prevent any inappropriate behaviour.

But what are the implications for this in the real world? What happens when under 18s meet the person they've had these conversations with? Behaving like an adult from the safety of a PC raises the expectation of performance in real life, and can lead kids into real experiences that they are ill-equipped to handle. This is a whole new kind of self-imposed pressure to act like an adult. Children are experimenting, they are not worldly-wise; and adults (parents, teachers, online environments and site moderators) have a duty to help them cope – online and offline. Adults need to understand the online environment in order to help their children stay safe in the real world, when they may have got into a sticky situation online.

In our experience of moderating online environments for teens and tweens, we find that tweens in particular are more likely to give up personal information about themselves online. This is the single biggest problem for moderators. It may be direct information such as phone number or street name, as in this example is taken from a large children's brand:

your my hero as i have no dad. im your biggest fan please call me.
my number is (XXXXXX)

When children find that human or automated filters are blocking phone numbers, they're quick to try to find a way around – for example: "My number is Too Tree Tree Ate On Fort Hive Steven". This will get around a simple filter, but not the optimum combination of an intelligent filter (such as Crisp Thinking's NetModerator) and human eyes.

The identifying information may not be such 'direct' information. It could be a school mascot symbol, a state or county identification, or a club badge – the jigsaw pieces of which could be enough to identify and befriend a child for a predator.

For example:

My name is Louise and I love your shows! Are you coming to Iowa anytime soon for a show? I love to play soccer, I play number 11. and I know your favourite animal is a lion which is my school mascot.

This might seem innocent enough, but there may only be one middle school in Iowa with a school mascot of a lion. Find the school, go to a soccer practice and see the young girl wearing a shirt

with the number 11. A predator could walk up to her, say "Hi Louise, your Mom told me to come pick you up."

Live user-generated content, such as Twitter, opens up a whole new can of worms. Live, unfiltered information can open tweens and teens up to exposing information about themselves that can be dangerous: Izzy Neis, in her [blog on this subject](#), says:

"All it takes is for one 12 year old to have his/her location "Branson, MO" in their small profile with a single tweet of "walking to cherryvale mall to shop with lucy!"

We spoke to Izzy Neis, who summarised the situation beautifully:

"Youth Virtual Worlds/ MMOs are virtual playgrounds - with behaviors very similar to what you would find on a junior high/elementary playground at recess/lunch. Virtual worlds and MMOs are particularly poignant for the tween set - who are stuck between using the playground to play or using taking advantage of the landscape & demographic-scape to rule the world as they see fit. They balance back and forth between social play (imaginative) and social play (peer challenges & dramas). It's not always one or the other, often tween users balances between the two - depending on how their day went, or what escapism they need, or what reinforcement/acknowledgement they crave. They're taking the experiences they've had, applying imagination and exploring new territory (mainly adult situations). The result is to form some sort of hybrid where they're exploring what they feel they can control.

"The issue is - not all the kids are on the same behavior patterns, and sometimes these social landscapes online become dramatic tug-of-war games from kids trying to hide from outwardly participating in imagination games, and those who are craving the fantasy. Also, there are the same playground problems kids have every day - bullying, heartache, betrayal, etc. Puberty means that for this demographic everything is heightened, new and intense, and their social bubbles often rival (or supercede) family issues (because they have less power and say in family issues, and control is limited, or non-existent).

"These virtual spaces are opportunities for escapism. They provide an outlet and a chance to develop other aspects of their personalities they feel unable to explore during face-time (real life) for fear of rejection, or sometimes they're just trying something to try it - an opportunity to fail without physical consequence."

Moderating the older teen

It's not just younger teens and tweens who are in need of moderation. UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, launched www.yougoofurther.co.uk, an online community for applicants to Higher Education in 2007. Amy Rountree, until recently the web communities officer at UCAS, explains:

"The site enables applicants to meet people before they go to university. Because UCAS is highly respected and trusted within this 16+ age group, we could never compromise this. We felt we had a moral obligation to our members, and that they should be safeguarded at all times. That's why yougoofurther moderates all posts and validates its members using their application ID.

"Moderating 16+ communities is about balance. The law says that this age range are 'adults'. With this in mind (and rightly so), such users need their independence - but nonetheless they remain a vulnerable and impressionable group, prone to peer pressure and the excitement of youth.

"If the moderation is too heavy handed, sites risk not being used. If the moderation is too relaxed, the reputation of the site and any brand associated with it are at risk. We like to think we've got it about right on yougofurther, with a lively, thriving community where users feel safe."

It's noticeable that the behaviour of young adults varies on this type of site from the way they may present themselves online in other spaces – social networks or virtual worlds. Here, they tend to self-police more: keen to be seen as coherent adults, posts which become insulting are quickly put down by other users. Conversely, as this group are highly intelligent, they are likely to be adept at getting around moderating filters, so a human presence is essential to avoid the sharing of personal information. Cries for help may not be overt. Moderators must be vigilant for signs of distress in this group who under the huge pressure of life changes and exams, but the 'oh, I'm gonna kill myself' type of declaration is rare. When presented with more subtle clues, or a potential hoax, moderators analyse the tone of posting, and check back over the user's history to see whether this user is actually in crisis.

Moderation must be light of touch: posts may be edited rather than deleted, and users informed as to why their posts have been changed. Treating this group like the nascent adults they are reduces the likelihood of negative reactions if they feel they have been thwarted by moderation. A good moderator will try to preserve threads rather than delete them, so that debate and free thinking are encouraged.

Tanya Byron again: "Effective online management at this stage will involve providing opportunities for them to explore and try different roles and identities while offering non-judgmental support in the form of talking, discussing and supporting. At this stage [15 to 18 years] young people need to begin to make decisions for themselves and test things out while still having relationships in place with, for example, parents, family members or friends to support them if opportunities turn out to be too challenging."

As eModeration does, having a dedicated team who work with older teens on a site over a number of years brings rewards: they see the teens join the site when they are applying to university and then progressing through to actually getting their placements and onto their University lives. It's very gratifying to watch them grow from awkward recalcitrant teens into young adults on their first steps into adulthood.

Live content and access to celebrities creates a false illusion of security or friendship

The 'personal' contact with their idols offered by celebrity Twitter and fan sites can encourage children to post contact information in the hope that the celebrity will become their friend in real life (which also gives that child social currency in front of their friends). The kind of hero worship that teenagers can bestow on a pop idol or a film star is not a new thing (remember The Beatles?) but Twitter and fan sites open up a line of communication between that idol and the child that didn't exist before. Hero worship used to mean hanging round the stage door, or pinning up photos – but now is a kind of reciprocal cyber-stalking in the form of [live updates](#) ("I am truly blessed to have fans like you, love Britney"). This can be harmless enough, but may also put huge pressure both on the celebrity and the follower. Earlier this year, a follower of Demi Moore threatened suicide in a tweet to the actress, including the way she was going to do it: "Getting a knife, a big one that is sharp. Going to cut my arm down the whole arm so it doesn't waste time". This [well-publicised case](#) had a happy ending: Moore and other followers of the actress picked up the tweet, and the person in question was tracked down by the authorities. But the hysteria induced by perceived 'online contact' with their idols may not always be picked up and acted upon.

What does this mean for moderating this group online?

Our view is that if you are inviting teens or tweens into your online space, you are in effect throwing a huge round-the-clock party for them. And what parent in their right mind would send out invitations worldwide, then leave the keys to the liquor cabinet with their 15-year-old and go away for the weekend? Looking at it in that way, it's clear why moderation of these spaces, where technically feasible, is a must, to protect both brand and users. But the online world of teens and tweens is a complex one. We have mentioned already that adults involved in this world have a responsibility to help steer children through the highs and lows, while allowing them to be children. So, what does this mean for those moderating online environments aimed at teens and tweens? This is not, of course, a definitive list, but is designed to provide guidelines to those involved in running these online environments.

1. Inhabit their world.

- ***Understand the language used by teens / tweens.*** This includes keeping up to date with changing language trends, including code words that children use to get round automated filters.
- ***Understand that children are developing and allow them some freedom to do this.*** At this stage in their lives, they are forming individual opinions and testing ideas, and no adult will stop this process (and nor should they). Our role as adults is to keep children safe, not censor them. But be clear what the line is, and intervene once it is crossed.
- ***Listen to concerns or questions, and respond quickly.*** Traffic should be two-way – not only to protect your users and your brand, but also to learn from them and develop your offering. We've put together a whole list of methods on how to listen (and what to listen for) on our [blog](#).
- ***Avoid being intrusive,*** or engaging with the user over the wrong platform. Listen (see above) to what platform children want to engage with you over, and use it.
- ***Earn trust and respect.*** This is so important to young people finding their own boundaries and voices. Show trust and respect (and consistency), and don't patronise teens and tweens. That way you'll get trust and respect back.
- ***Keep them engaged and happy online.*** Diffuse difficult situations, be aware of the day-to-day dramas and heartache and help them through the highs and lows. But don't jump in too soon. Assuming a child is not in any danger, he or she will only learn how to deal with the emotional journey of teenage years by experiencing it.

2. Keep them safe.

- ***Watch out for and deter cyberbullying, peer-to-peer abuse*** and the kind of peer pressure that leads to this abuse. Researchers cited by CNET in [an article on online abuse](#) say that anywhere from 40 percent to 85 percent of kids have been exposed to some kind of digital bullying, whether it's a stolen password or being called "fat" via instant message. The same article refers to Megan Meir, the 13-year old Missouri girl who took her own life after repeated bullying on MySpace. Of course, this kind of bullying may have happened offline – but online it is possible to spot it, and intervene. There is currently no legislation to prevent this kind of bullying, but this may change. Of course, there is a moral duty to intervene where possible.

- ***Spot and prevent grooming behaviour.*** Technology has become so advanced that it is possible to use software as well as human moderators to spot early grooming behaviour by analysing patterns of behaviour, and to link that behaviour to previous activity on a website. For example, software can pick up whether the same person has used potential grooming behaviour with more than one child, even when the questions on an individual basis can seem innocuous. [Crisp](#), a partner of eModeration, is doing great work in this area. More on this in our [white paper](#) on keeping children safe online.
- ***Keep children safe from themselves.*** Most children will give away personally identifying information (particularly from live feeds) without even thinking about the consequences, which can lead to abuse. As we've seen (above), online conduct is more likely to include bullying, or inappropriate material (such as sexting) and bad language. The UK government's [Byron report](#) discusses the consequences of children's own behaviour online: it is a permanent record, visible to all and able to be shared instantly – so a compromising photo can be passed between friends and then strangers, be posted online to social networks and may never go away. Byron also heeds the importance of steering children away from the kind of online sexual experiences (that may lead to offline experiences) for which they may not be ready.
- ***Don't let them be exposed to potentially damaging, offensive or otherwise inappropriate material, uploaded by other users.*** The report of the Byron review details some of the potential ill effects on children of exposure to violent material, and the excellent Channel 4 series '[The Sex Education Show](#)' (now sadly no longer viewable) talked about the effect that the ease of access to pornographic images is having on teenagers in Britain today. In online environments where children (or predatory adults) are uploading information or material, moderation needs to ensure that this material is suitable and safe for others to see. Again, technology is making huge strides in this area, with tools like [Keibi](#), and Crisp Thinking's soon-to-come [NetModerator™ for User Generated Content \(UGC\)](#), both of which can 'triage' large amounts of images or videos for human moderation. eModeration has also just started to work with a company called [ReputationShare](#), which helps to identify and block regular abusers of online environments, by creating a 'reputation index' of users.
- ***Educate them on the consequences of inappropriate behaviour.*** The role of a moderator in educating children is to work with parents and other adult role models to act as a guide for children – akin to a teacher in the playground, rather than a more censorial role – to help diffuse potentially damaging situations, or help children work their responses out for themselves. Steven Fry, talking at the Digital Britain Summit, and quoted in the introduction to Chapter 7 of the UK government's recent Digital Britain Report (the chapter relating to children's security online) says:

"We have always had the ability to create structures that are quite bewildering to us. A good example is a city. I would say that the Internet is more like a city than anything else. In cities there are slums, there are palaces of wisdom, libraries, museums, art galleries, theatres, places of entertainment and shops. And there are places in those cities where you would not want to go down dark alleys let alone have your children do so, but slowly we let our children learn to use the cities and they do."
- ***Create mechanisms to report abusive behaviour, or give feedback, or voice concerns.*** It is so important that children can easily voice their concerns or ask questions in confidence. More on this in [our white paper on safety techniques](#).

3. The moderator's role as 'guardian'

Adults who have a presence in online worlds inhabited by children – no matter how good their intentions – will be seen alternately as role model, common enemy, powers-that-be, guide, teacher and intruder. That is the role of an adult mentor, or guide, to a teenager starting to flex their muscles, and is the way of the world. But above all, moderators must be a guide to steer children through difficulties, and someone to keep them from self-harm or abuse by others.

We've looked at the impact on children of not moderating their behaviour, but it is worth mentioning the potential impact on brands, too. Currently, there is no legal obligation to moderate online behaviour or content – although the [Digital Britain report](#) indicates that a content labelling system of some sort is not far away – but of course there is a moral one. The reputational risk of being associated with offensive material could have wide-reaching implications for brands.

The final word: how do successful brands do it?

Finally, it's always helpful to see how other brands moderate their online environments, and the following list gives some useful examples of brands that we think do it well:

- [Dizzywood](#). (Note: eModeration helped guide Dizzywood's culture and moderation approach when it launched.) Dizzywood is aimed at tweens (under 12s), and uses visible moderators who take on characters to interact with the players, in the role of host and guide. The characterisation of the moderator allows distance between moderator and child, which is so important if you are to retain impartiality. Dizzywood won [a PRIVO seal](#) in April 2008 to mark it as one of the safest online environments for children.
- [Club Penguin](#). This is aimed at the under 12s, and generally is a site that parents feel their kids are safe playing on (notwithstanding the occasional 'bump' mentioned above).
- [Neopets](#). This is one of the biggest players in the virtual worlds space and lets kids take care of virtual pets.
- [Lego](#). A great site for Lego fans, that uses full moderation.
- [Yougofurther](#). Also an eModeration client. This is aimed at the other end of the age range, at young adults starting their university lives, and is fully moderated.
- [ABC Family](#) is a well moderated site, which has portions aimed at teen, e.g. [The Secret Life of the American Teenager](#). The ABC security team work closely with the moderators, and are on call 24/7 for security alerts (suicide, bomb threat, child abuse) which are always investigated and action taken if necessary.

For a full list of teen and tween sites worth looking at, see Izzy Neis's [blog](#).

For more information on creating and managing communities, or moderating interactive brand campaigns, see eModeration's [website](#), or read our [blog](#).

And finally... a big thank you to all the friends and colleagues who helped contribute to this paper, but particularly:

- [Izzy Neis](#)
- Amy Rountree (now social media executive at [Fingleaves](#), formerly web communities officer at [UCAS](#))
- Jan Bliss and Sherry Wilcox, [eModeration](#)

About eModeration

Founded in 2002, eModeration Limited is an international, specialist user-generated content moderation company. It provides multilingual community management and content moderation to clients in the entertainment and digital publishing industry and major corporate clients hosting online communities and consumer-driven projects.

eModeration's CEO and founder, Tamara Littleton, has an established background in editorial quality control, fault escalation and process management gained from previous work as the Product Delivery Director for Chello Broadband and Online Operations Manager for BBC Online, where she managed the world's first ISO 9000-accredited team for digital publishing management and monitored over 400 BBC websites. Tamara Littleton is a member of the Home Office Internet Taskforce for Child Protection on the Internet which brings together government, law enforcement, children's agencies and the internet industry, who are all working to ensure that children can use the internet in safety. She was also the Chair of emint, the online community for community professionals from 2006-2007.

eModeration's team of moderators and staff are the key to eModeration's success and excellent client list. eModeration draws on the expertise of carefully recruited and trained moderators located mainly in the US and Europe with specialist editorial and community moderation skills, which are matched uniquely to the client. The company can moderate 24/7 in more than 30 languages. All its moderators are managed online from eModeration's headquarters in London, United Kingdom.

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