



# RESEARCH REPORT

EXPLORING HYBRID  
MISSION AMONGST  
YOUNG PEOPLE

A Report by

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# Executive summary

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- ➔ The aim of this research study was to explore the missional space of children and young people's (8-16 years old) hybrid worlds.
  - ➔ The research heard from 155 young people (88 interviews and online surveys with a further 67 young people) and 120 youth leaders - investigating their experiences and perceptions of online and hybrid spaces, and their views on the most appropriate ways to explore the Christian faith.
  - ➔ Our data shows that young people are simultaneously active in their in-person and online worlds, and hence missional activity must reflect this hybrid reality.
  - ➔ According to the young people in this study, there is minimal evidence of Christian mission and ministry occurring in these online and hybrid spaces.
  - ➔ These young people explained that 'fact-finding' tasks of exploring the Christian faith could occur online, but if they wished to explore faith more in-depth and personally, they would seek to explore this with someone who was already known and trusted by them. This demonstrates the need for increased hybrid missional approaches.
  - ➔ Our findings revealed minimal sense of agency of non-churched young people in the influences upon their own developing religious beliefs. Young people who attended church regularly seemed more aware of influences upon them and made more active and intentional choices. Missional youth work could seek to equip and empower young people to be more aware and more engaged in the formation of their own religious identity and belief systems.
  - ➔ Our study revealed a mismatch between youth leaders and young people's perceptions about the influences and preferences of young people. Dialogue around this would be beneficial so that missional activity may be more informed.
  - ➔ This is clearly an area which needs more exploration and engagement since the missional scope is evident, and yet seems to be minimal at this time.
- Please get in touch if you want to discuss this further, as the church continues to explore and venture into these online and hybrid spaces to share the Christian gospel message.  
**(Email: [youngfaith@hope.ac.uk](mailto:youngfaith@hope.ac.uk))**

## Further reading

We have two academic journal articles which develop the discussion in this report more fully:

**Holmes, S.E., May, B. & Davison, S.** *pending publication:*

The context for evangelism- online or in person?

A discourse analysis of young people's perspectives about God and faith.

**May, B. & Holmes, S.E.** *pending publication:*

Who are they listening to and how?

An exploration of the influences on the religious faith of young people in the UK.

# I Introduction

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This research project was birthed by Scripture Union's desire to find out more about the context and possibilities of mission with young people in hybrid spaces.

In line with the missional focus of Scripture Union, there was an **intentional focus on researching relational mission opportunities with children and young people who have no regular contact with church**, rather than those already attending church. There was also an **intentional interest in hybrid spaces, rather than online** because there is significant awareness that young people today are simultaneously involved in online and offline spaces....they may be sitting at home with their immediate family, but at the same time may be chatting on social media with their friends on the other side of the world! These may be friends they know in person also but may well be friends they have made online due to being like-minded or

sharing the same interests. And often these online friendships can be deeply personal, with the young people discussing personal values, experiences and ideas through online connection.

Scripture Union wanted to know **what does mission look like in this context?** And how could the local church or wider Christian community be equipped to engage in missional activity in this hybrid reality of young people. A partnership was therefore forged with Liverpool Hope University to carry out some exploratory research. We wanted to find out what young people who did not attend church thought about God and faith, and whether or not they would ever explore this online or in person. The conversations we had with these young people were fascinating and illuminating. This report presents the findings of this research project and our heart is that these will help to inform your mission and ministry amongst young people.

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**the church can learn a lot from listening to the voices of these young people as they form and shape mission in the reality of this hybrid world.**



## 2 Research methodology

In accordance with the aim of exploring the context and experience of young people relating to God and faith in hybrid spaces, there were two distinct phases to the research.

Firstly, we were very keen to speak only with **young people who did not describe themselves as Christian**, to find out what they thought and felt on some of these issues. So focus groups were arranged, gathering 55 young people in groups of four or five (aged 8-16 years old) and leading them through discussions on topics such as who inspires and influences them, what they think of influencers, and who they think to be most trustworthy to ask if they wanted to explore religious faith. The conversations were recorded and analysed later. There were significant ethical considerations surrounding these groups, and these were navigated through implementing the insights of the Liverpool Hope University Ethics Committee.

The second research phase sought **insights from young people who were regular church attenders** using online surveys from 67 and focus groups with a further 33 young people. The interviews with these young people asked broadly the same questions as the first cohort. The anonymous nature of the surveys enabled the young people to answer freely and honestly, with the surveys being a mixture of open-ended and closed questions. Phase two was informed by phase one so that we could unpack and test some of the findings emerging from phase one. Alongside this, an almost identical survey was circulated to 120 youth leaders so that we could ask them the same questions to enable comparative analysis between responses of the two groups - to show how closely the views of the young people and youth leaders aligned.



The findings from both phases of the research are presented and discussed below. They are the culmination of discourse analysis, content analysis and narrative analysis on different strands of the data collected. We had hoped for larger participant numbers, but were hampered by significant challenges of gaining access to non-Christian young people and seeking to converse with them about God and faith. Gaining consent from the young person and their parents and gatekeeper was a significant barrier, but of course it was essential to maintain these high ethical standards. So we offer these findings as tentative observations, but nevertheless they present the views and perspectives of a significant number of young people and also show some distinct patterns emerging from the data. **It is clear that the church can learn a lot from listening to the voices of these young people as they form and shape mission in the reality of this hybrid world.**

## 3 Research findings



### 3.1 Dialogue about exploring faith

The first thing we noticed was the **openness of the young people (non-churched and churched alike) to share their opinions and experiences in the interviews.**



All of the focus group participants exhibited an openness, **mutual respect** and supportive manner for one another during the discussions. There was a willingness across all groups to participate in the conversations which flowed easily in all areas, whether it be about their experiences in school, home, online, church or faith. The young people who did not attend church tended to **draw on their limited experience about religious faith**, such as within school, extended family or even TV personalities when talking about faith. Very rarely, they drew on their personal experience. They did not have an extensive vocabulary for discussing spiritual matters and would substitute more familiar words in order to get across their message, for instance, they talked about those who were ‘really big Christians,’ to describe those with an active faith. The unchurched participants indicated that this wasn’t something they felt connected to themselves, with responses such as: ‘I don’t really get big questions about faith.’ It was clear that for the majority, **the Christian faith was simply not on their radar** or an area of interest, although they were open and willing to discuss it.



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The participants exhibited two routes of exploring the Christian faith. Firstly, they expressed an **information-seeking** exercise; such as collecting necessary facts or information to complete their homework about religion. The second was a **deeper level of exploring**, which may involve spiritual experiences, or talking about bigger life questions. Not only was it apparent that this was something the young people were open to engaging with, but also that it was not really something they could find or engage with online. Sometimes this was because they would prefer to seek that input face to face, and more often with someone with whom they already had a relationship, but it also seemed to be because of a lack of Christian presence in online spaces for them to access and engage with.

When asked about the Christian faith in online spaces, all of the churched young people said that they did not think there were many places for a young person to explore Christianity online. Many cited the Bible app, podcasts and worship music but said that these were not really suitable for young people who were not yet Christian. They **expressed caution about young people exploring faith online** because it was hard to tell which information could be trusted.

# 3 Research findings

## 3.2 Online vs. in-person

It was clear that the young people in both groups did not see traditional divides between the online and in-person arenas, but viewed these **spaces as integrated and overlapping**. For them, the emphasis was on the different styles of communicating with people they know or do not know. Online communication was valued most as a space to extend the relationships and connections they had with family and friends. Sometimes online communication was seen as the only viable option to develop those relationships, for instance when family members lived far away. For others, it was valued as a space where they could “carry on the conversations on the phone.” There was an underpinning understanding and awareness in all participants of ‘**stranger danger**’ online and whilst the young people talked positively about their online interactions with those they had existing offline relationships with, they spoke with caution about online opportunities to connect with those they do not otherwise know. For example, “I don’t chat to people on online games.”

There was a similar difference in approach to matters of faith and spirituality and the choices they made to engage online or in person. The online world was positively viewed as a **space where they could access information**; perhaps in an RE lesson or to complete homework, although even then, participants were cautious about trusting everything they saw or read; “I would look on several websites to see if it says the same things.” However, when the young people wanted to probe something further, or experience it for themselves, they **overwhelmingly preferred to do so in person**, and significantly opted to turn to family members (usually parents) first, with the suggestion that you could also talk to friends, teachers or look to the church for help.

The churched young people were similarly cautious when asked whether a young person could explore the Christian faith online. Many noted the advantage of anonymity when searching online, which was particularly beneficial if the young person was ‘too shy to talk about it.’ However, many of this cohort suggested that it may be helpful for a young person to initially look online to investigate Christianity, but after these initial investigations they suggested that it would be **better to then talk with someone they know is a Christian**. All of the churched young people stated that taking an exploring young person to their church would be a helpful next step, and they all spoke very strongly about the warm welcome and supportive atmosphere which young people would receive if they went there to explore. This emphasises the overlapping nature of online/in person spaces for the young people.



# 3 Research findings

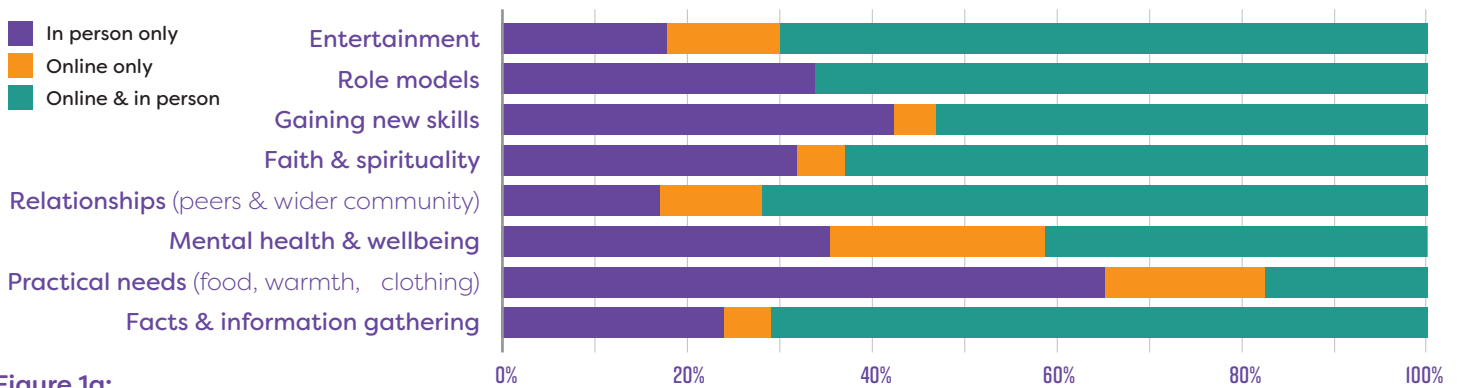
## 3.2 Insights from the interviews (Continued)

In the surveys, the young people were asked about their preferences for online vs in-person spaces and activities. Figures 1a and 1b show that **they do not see the traditional divisions between online and offline spaces** but **were comfortable and proficient in both**. The option to only access support online was hardly selected, although about a third expressed there was a preference to access support in person and in more than half of the cases the preference was to have the option of both online and in person support. Engaging in activities showed similar trends (figure 1b), although there were even fewer responses indicating a preference for online only connections. Participants

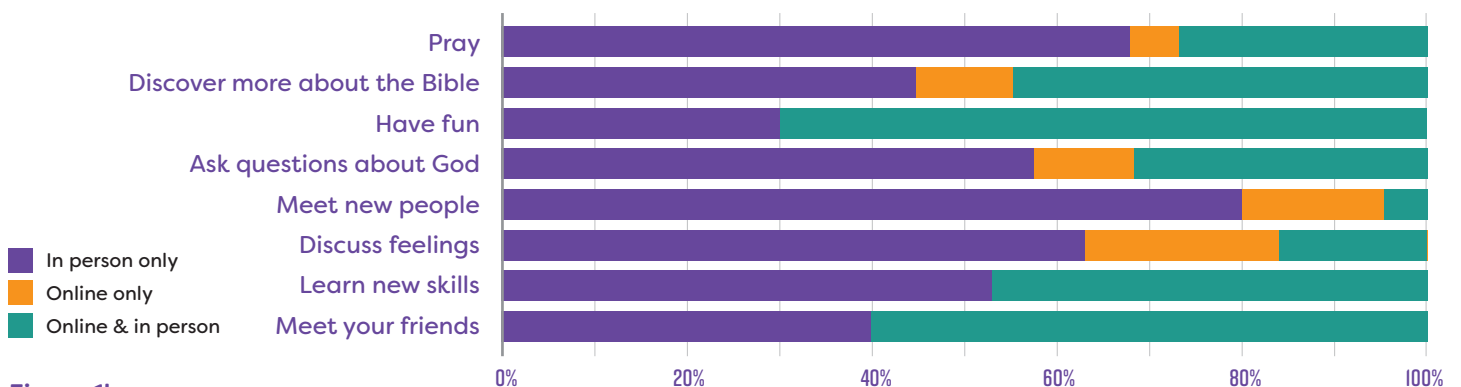
generally expressed preference for in person or both in person and online. Once again, this demonstrates the value of missional activity being of a hybrid nature.



**the young people in both groups did not see traditional divides between the online and in-person arenas, but viewed these spaces as integrated and overlapping.**



**Figure 1a:** Young people's preferences for places to access support



**Figure 1b:** Young people's preferences for places to take part in activities

## 3 Research findings

### 3.3 Inspirers and Influencers

Both cohorts of young people all spoke positively about the idea that **someone could inspire them** and offered a wide range of responses as to whom this may be, from family members through to footballers. They gave clear and wide-ranging reasons as to why those people inspired them, all of which were overwhelmingly positive and often spoke of determination or hard work to achieve something. In the survey responses, family (mentioned by 80% of respondents) and friends (65%) constituted a significant majority of the responses. Half of the respondents identified sports champions as inspiring them, whilst 35% stated that teachers and celebrities did. Only 5% chose youth leaders, scientists, or fictional characters. Reasons given were often rooted in values or characteristics they saw in the person from them being “loving and honest,” to “they change the world and stop climate change,” and often the

young people spoke of them overcoming adversity to achieve their goal or achievement.

However, when they were asked about those who influenced them, their thoughts immediately turned to **the role of an online influencer and were far less positive**. A typical definition given to describe influence was ‘you’re doing something and you make other people want to do it with you because it looks good.’ Their responses to the idea of influencers were mixed; never purely positive but often seeing both negative and positive aspects. For instance; “I think it depends what they’re trying to influence you in,” “some influencers influence things that aren’t needed or healthy,” “Joe Wicks in lockdown, that really helped.” The church-attending young people seemed to be much more cautious and intentional about not following influencers,



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Only half of the participants believed that they themselves could influence other people.

# 3 Research findings

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## 3.3 Inspirers and Influencers (Continued)

explaining safeguards and boundaries they put in place for themselves. Whilst they expressed that they rarely heard influencers talking about faith ‘because people will stop watching’ or ‘that will start the hater’s comments,’ they observed that often the topic of religious faith or God arises within typed comments between young people who are watching, rather from the influencer themselves. They generally observed these comments to be negative.

In the surveys, 63% of the young people stated that they were influenced by what they saw online, 21% felt that they were not and 16% did not know. There was a strong sense conveyed by many of the young people that **these influences could be both positive and negative**. Some responded in a way which indicated a positive perspective: “helps me learn stuff” or “seeing good things, you think you can do it too.” Others showed that they understood it was more complex; “I am influenced in some bad and some good ways: There are bad

things you can learn like swears, inappropriate moves etc. But you can learn good things like how to cook or do stuff.” A few responded in a way that indicated a negative perception of online influence and that a decision had been made on their behalf, not to engage with it, ‘I’m not allowed online too much.’ This indicated a lack of agency of the young person in some cases.

When it came to understanding how spirituality or an exploration of Christian faith could be influenced, **almost all of the unchurched young people knew one or more Christians** and these were in different contexts from school and friends to extended, and occasionally immediate family. It was fascinating to glimpse the way in which they interpreted or understood how significant people in their lives may or may not play a part in influencing their own faith journey. They expressed that if a significant person, such as a parent, had a faith, then that would influence their child. However, they expressed equally strongly that if a parent had no faith of their own, **that would not influence their child’s faith**. Hence, the unchurched young people all conveyed that the presence of a believing parent could be positively influencing, but the presence of a non-believing parent would be neutral and have no influence on the child, as one commented, for example; “my mum’s side wants to raise us as atheists to begin with and if we want to go off and explore it later, we can. She doesn’t want us to be influenced by that.” Many spoke of these influences as ‘**pushing**’ or ‘**pulling**’ them towards or away from religious faith.

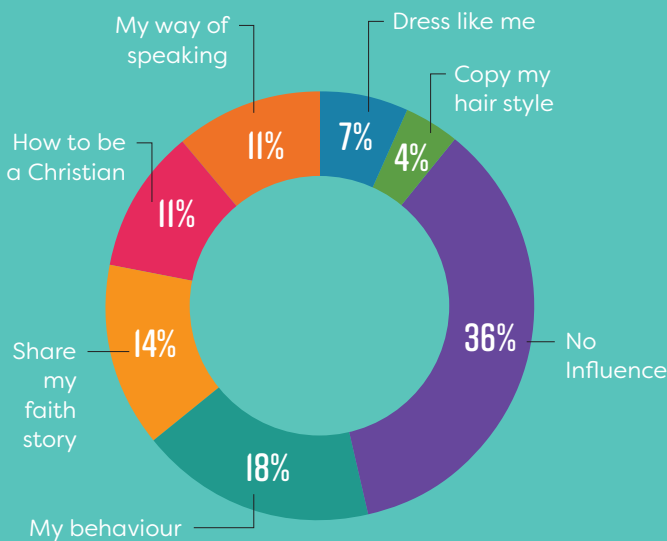


# 3 Research findings

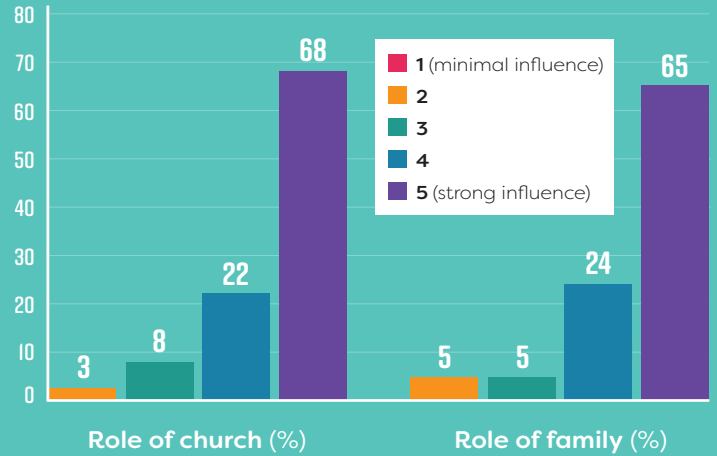
## 3.3 Inspirers and Influencers (Continued)

As they described these influences, it was clear that the unchurched participants felt that they had no **sense of agency or control of these factors upon them**. Rather they seemed passively resigned to the fact that these aspects would influence their capacity for having religious beliefs, but they could not (and did not seem to desire to) control these influences in any way. In contrast, all of the interview participants who were church attendees were much more aware of the influences upon themselves and their beliefs than the unchurched groups.

Only half of the participants believed that **they themselves could influence other people**. In the cases where they felt they may influence others, figure 2 shows the responses they gave as to the ways in which this occurs. Younger participants were less aware of this, although from about twelve years old, the churched participants usually were acutely aware of the possibility that they may influence others, with over half seeing



**Figure 2:** How the young people perceived they influenced others



**Figure 3:** How the young people perceived the role of church and family in impacting their exploration of faith or values

this through an evangelistic lens, namely that they could positively influence others in relation to the Christian faith.

In the survey, when asked about the potential influences on their own faith, these young people felt that church was the most significant influence if they wished to explore their own faith and values, followed very closely by family. Figure 3 shows the respective responses with 1 being no influence and 5 being strong influence. The young people did not believe that social media or influencers had much of an influence on their exploration of faith at all (figure 4).



**Many spoke of these influences as ‘pushing’ or ‘pulling’ them towards or away from religious faith.**

# 3 Research findings

## 3.4 Comparing perspectives of youth leaders

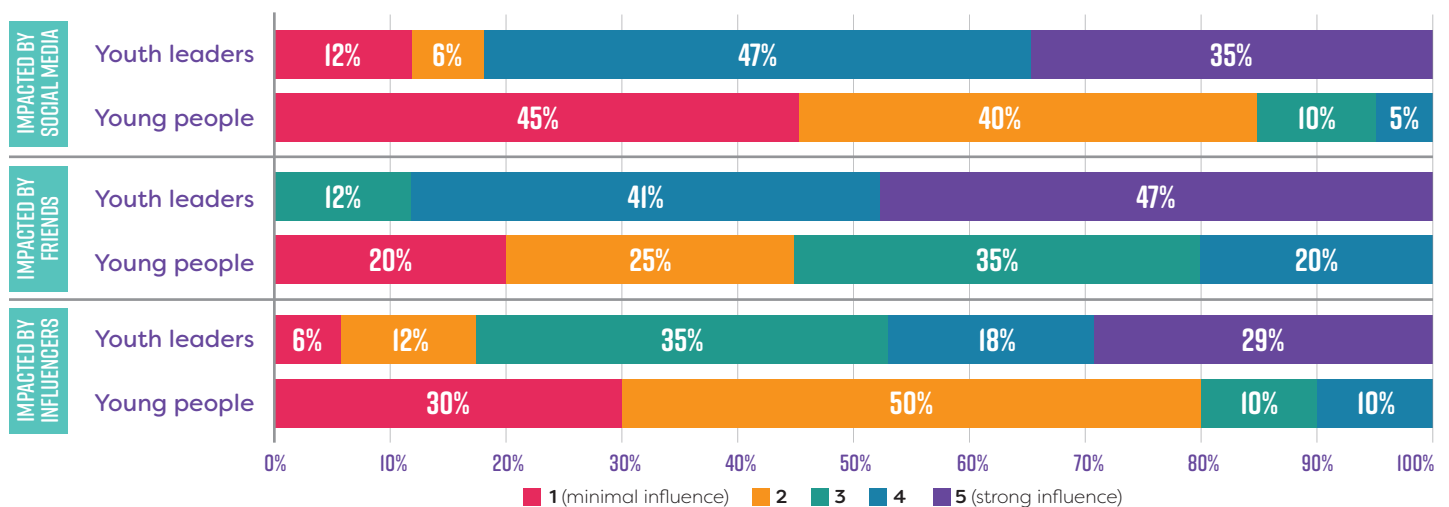
When comparing the young people’s data with that of youth leaders, it is evident that there were significant contrasts between the two perspectives.

Figure 4 reveals the differences in the way they thought about influences. The leaders generally deemed that the children and young people were **more greatly influenced by influencers than the young people themselves perceived**. It also illuminates differences of opinion relating to the **influence of friends and social media**, since the youth leaders perceived that friends were a much stronger influence on young people than they did themselves. The young people perceived that family was a greater influence than friends. The youth leaders also deemed that social media had a much greater influence on young people than the young people did.

felt a connection to the person in some way, whether out of personal relationship or a felt connection, perhaps over a shared experience, but the youth leaders spoke about influence in far more abstract terms; ‘They are seen as people to emulate / aspire to be,’ ‘they appear attractive and successful and have done something significant or meaningful.’

“it is evident that there were significant contrasts between the two perspectives.”

Where the young people felt they were influenced, their comments suggested that they



**Figure 4:** Comparison of youth leader and young people responses about perceptions of influence

# 4 Conclusions

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## 4.1 The need for enhancing hybrid mission

This research project sought to find out more about the world in which young people live; and the remit of online and in-person spaces for them.

We were also interested in illuminating the attitudes of children and young people about the reality of their hybrid world and where exploration of the Christian faith may occur. The research has shown clearly that the notion of hybrid spaces isn't new, but rather has the potential to encompass all aspects of young people's lives. Whilst at home, they may be simultaneously connecting with family and friends in the same room and on opposite sides of the world. They move effortlessly between the two, as any needs and opportunities arise. The young people in our study expressed the distinct advantages that one has over the other; online information for quick answers and face to face conversations to wonder and explore together, online connectivity to stay in touch, and face to face to address deeper issues. They conveyed that they expected and chose to move between online and in person spaces and expressed a preference for the combination. However, these young people identified an absence in their online worlds of Christian content or opportunities to connect or explore. This leaves a gap between the spaces where young people are experiencing their lives, and the spaces in which the church is involved in mission and ministry. And whilst the churched young people did express distinct positives about the in person church, the unchurched young people saw minimal value in engaging with church in



person. This highlights the need for the church to engage more with young people through hybrid opportunities, providing opportunities to explore and experience faith as the young people move between online and in-person spaces as part of their daily lives. The youth leaders who participated in this study indicated that perhaps the motivations and models of youth work currently utilised may need to be revised in light of this.

# 4 Conclusions

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## 4.2 The context for hybrid mission

These young people were open to discuss issues of faith and spirituality but unsurprisingly revealed a lack of confidence, information, vocabulary and experience in these conversations.

God, faith, Christianity, prayer, the Bible, church were all outside of their life experience and so often they were not even sure what questions they themselves may have. It is therefore key for those involved in mission amongst children and young people to be mindful that the gospel message may be completely unknown to them, and no assumptions can be made about their experience or knowledge of this area. Equally, the experience they feel they do have (such as what they have observed about the Christian faith on a TV sitcom), may be very different from what Christian missionaries may expect. Hence, it is vitally important to listen and dialogue in very open-minded ways. The young people in this study highlighted that exploration of faith could occur either in a fact-finding way (which they preferred to do online), or in a deeper conversational manner (which they would prefer to do with people they knew and trusted). This emphasises the need for hybrid rather than online-only or in person only mission, to provide the young people with opportunities to explore more deeply in a personal rather than a remote and depersonalised manner. Underpinning this, was a sense conveyed by the young people of being passive regarding the influences on their faith and beliefs. Many described this as

being subject to 'push/pull' influences on them, with little agency or control on their part over these influences. This indicates that equipping and empowering young people to take more intentional control and choice of the influences upon their emerging beliefs and values would be a beneficial focus of Christian mission and ministry.



# 4 Conclusions

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## 4.3 Influences on young people

The young people in our study discerned a difference between being inspired by someone (which they perceived as always positive) and the idea of being influenced (which they understood as having the potential to be either positive or negative).

Hence, they treated ‘influencers’ with an element of caution. These young people identified their family as having the greatest influence on them, but did not recognise that a parent’s lack of faith may in itself influence them. They could only see when influence on faith or values may be due to a parent having their own faith which they pass on. They did not perceive that if a parent does not have a faith of their own, this could have

an influence on their faith or values. Whilst the research participants identified that they were subject to the influence of others, they did not recognise this influence as being particularly significant. Similarly, they perceived that they had minimal influence on others. With this in mind, further work is required to explore how children and young people recognise influence in their own lives and the lives of others.

## 4.4 Discerning the way ahead

This research data indicates that the perspectives of young people and youth leaders in our sample were markedly different.

The young people perceived less influence in their own lives than the leaders did. On the one hand, attention must be paid to the perspectives of young people since it is their lived experience. Conversely, it could be said that they are less aware of the influences upon themselves and that youth leaders perceive more from an outside ‘observer’ view. Regardless of the reasons for this disparity, this indicates the need for increased conversation to bring about clarity for both parties and to then discern how to support young people

in their faith explorations within these parameters. Our findings suggest that young people look for input, information and support both online and in-person. However, the youth leaders placed far greater importance on in person interactions. This emphasises the need to further explore the potential of online and hybrid spaces and the associated missional opportunities so that they can be integrated and embedded into future missional strategies.

# Acknowledgements

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We are first and foremost thankful to all of the young people who took part in this research - whether through joining focus group discussions or completing the online survey. Often adults assume what young people may want or need, but it's so important to hear from young people themselves. However, we are very aware that there are so many things competing for your time and attention. So thank you for generously giving of your time in this way.

Thank you also to the various youth leaders and schools workers who enabled or facilitated these focus group discussions to occur, or who completed the survey for youth workers. Thank you also to Becky May who has worked so hard analysing much of the data collected for this research project. And finally, thank you to Scripture Union and Liverpool Hope University for funding this project collaboratively.



If you'd like to explore how the findings in this report could impact your mission with children and young people and explore the ways that your local SU team could support you and your church please do get in touch.

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If you have any further questions about the research process or are interested in discovering more about Liverpool Hope University, you can contact;

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