

Chaffinch Summary

Forum Design Features

Chaffinch is a charity support service designed to provide young people with a safe place to connect and thrive, and help young people with a range of problems including mental health, money, homelessness, school, and their social lives. The website includes many resources including an online forum where users can discuss their issues with their peers. As well as the online forum, the website includes links to helpful articles, directions to a text messaging service for crisis management, evening support groups, a helpline and counselling service. Although Chaffinch is

not specifically advertised anywhere, it is often shared and signposted to, from social media and other charity organizations. The website is openly accessible, and the discussion boards can be viewed by anyone. Signing up to post on the discussion boards is also open to anyone between the ages of 13 and 25.



The forum is divided into several discussion categories including drug and alcohol problems, general health and wellbeing, and student life, amongst others. Within each category, the thread with the most recent post appears first. Threads can be tagged with specific topics e.g. depression, stress, and loneliness. The most popular tags can be viewed and filtered on the main discussion boards page. A full text search is available. The top of each discussion board contains a link to the forum guidelines. The focus of these guidelines is on building a supportive community by emphasizing a sense of togetherness and encouraging users to be compassionate with each other. The guidelines also encourage users to make use of crisis services when necessary. The guidelines introduce the staff team, who can be contacted via email and direct messaging on the forum. Guidelines are contributed to by a group of 12 members who feedback on how the forum can be improved. There is also an annual survey so all users can be heard and suggests ways the forum can work better.

Users are encouraged to use the discussion boards as an anonymous safe space. People are free to share their first name, but they are warned not to post more identifying information such as their full name, address, email, or phone number. Identifiable information shared through other means (text, counselling services) may be shared with other organisations if they believe that someone's life is in danger, in accordance with their confidentiality policy.

Users have various means of interacting beyond simply replying to posts. Individual posts can be responded to via emotes e.g. like, thank you, or hug. Messages composed in response to threads can also include emoticons. Users can include a tagline in their posts which allows them to display some of their personality or just let others know a little about them. Beyond this, users can also earn various ranks and rewards by being active members of the community, which is displayed alongside their username when the user makes a post

Moderation

Chaffinch is moderated by a team of 12 volunteer moderators and a staff team of 4. The staff team are paid members of the host charity. Who the moderators are, and a blurb introducing them is available on the 'meet the mods' page. Moderators must complete a series of online e-learning curriculum courses covering a wide range of skills required for moderating an online forum. Volunteer moderators will also need to pass induction training to continue volunteering. Courses include conflict resolution, anxiety and depression, and essential skills for online support. It takes around 4 hours to complete this training. Once moderators have completed their basic training, they will initially engage in practice shifts where they will draft responses to posts and send them via email to the wider team. Once skilled in providing emotional support, they will then shadow a more experienced moderator before finally engaging in a buddy shift with another moderator. Moderator shifts are 2 hours and usually each moderator has one shift per week.

The charity has an on-call number that can be contacted if the moderators identify a safeguarding issue. The on-call hours are 9am-12am daily. Moderators who identify risk or have a user's post flagged to them by another user, can escalate to the on-call team who may contact emergency services or respond to the user by signposting to the charity's crisis messenger service which is available 24/7 or may direct them to another charity organisation such as the Samaritans or potentially encourage the at-risk user to attend A&E or call 999. A moderator shift guide covers how these issues should be dealt with and when they should be escalated.

Several tools are available to support moderation. A reported posts section allows moderators to check any posts that have been reported by other users. A separate flagged posts area allows them to check posts that have been flagged by other moderators. Moderators also check posts from the previous shift to check for safeguarding concerns and see if any need replies or if any discussions are becoming heated. In this case moderators are encouraged to only delete posts that are deemed unsafe, offensive or abusive, otherwise simply replying to help the discussion move forward and remain civil is considered the appropriate response. Moderators are generally expected to contribute to discussions where appropriate and to ensure guidelines are followed by other users.

Language Data

All forum posts were collected from Chaffinch discussion boards in March 2023. All posts from 2016 onwards were collected using a web scraper. The total number of users registered on the forum, in March 2023, is 5,804 and there were posts from 1,655 (28%) of users between March 2016 and March 2023. The dataset included 147,903 posts, with a total 8,095,416 words. In the 12 months, March 2022 to March 2023, 765 users registered and on average during the same period there were 51 posts per day from 12 different users. In the same 12-month period, the average user posted 62 times and the average response time between post and reply was 1 day, 6 hours, 42 minutes. Figure 1 shows the average number of posts per hour on the forum. Posting activity seems to peak around 4pm and reaches a minimum at 2-3am. There are a couple of notable lulls around 1pm and 7pm.

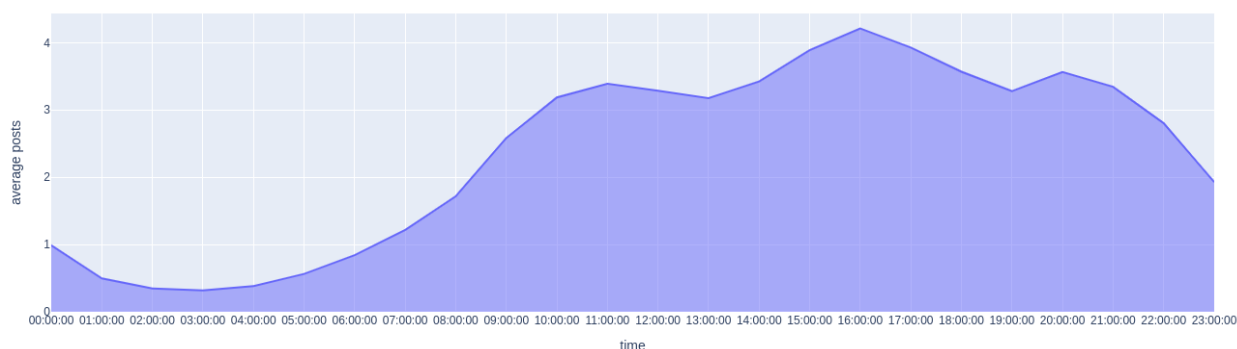


Figure 1 – Daily mean number of posts per hour

The most popular topics discussed in threads are displayed in Figure 2. Topic 0 is orientated around discussion of fun topics within the forum, this includes weekly photo contests, and several ways users can connect with each other. Topics 2 and 7 seem to indicate a lot of discussion around how the discussion boards are used, perhaps various forms of feedback from users, or advice to other users on how they can use the discussion boards. Topic 1 deals with users having issues and help or advice seeking when they're on the forum – this topic is likely to be most prevalent in the related discussion board categories e.g., drug and alcohol problems, health and wellbeing etc. Topic 3 is likely the counterpoint to this where the topic centers around positive ways of dealing with problems that might be being faced by users. Finally, topic 5 relates to conversations about family and relationships which will be very important for young people discussing their lives on a peer support forum.

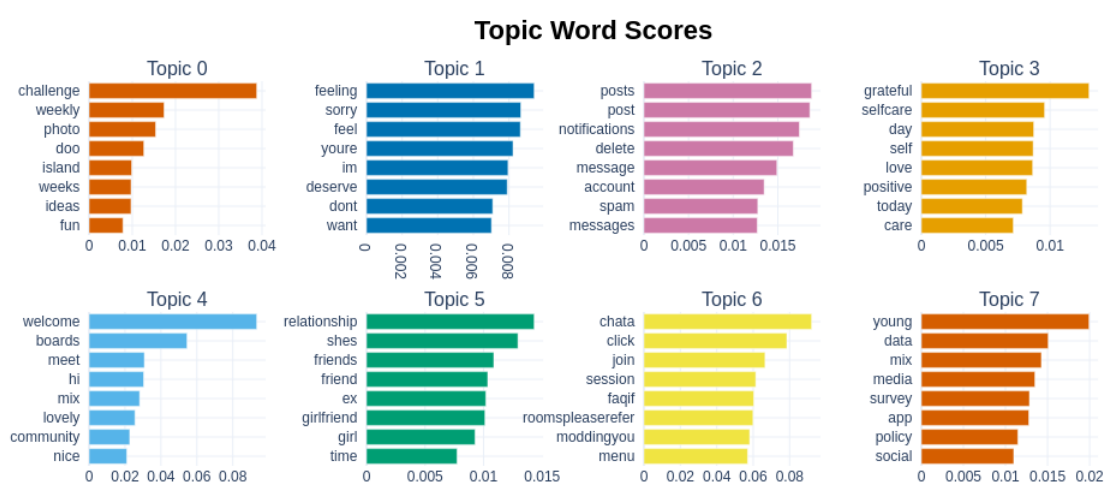


Figure 2 – Topic word scores generated by BertTopic

Figure 3 shows the distribution of these threads, with the most popular topics highlighted. As we might expect, topics 2 and 7 are proximally similar as they both relate to using the forum. We also find that topics 0 and 3 are similar as well, perhaps they both relate to positivity in some way, whether it be positive fun activities or positive ways to deal with day-to-day life. We can also see there is a larger cluster around topic 5, relationships, that indicates a very wide tendency to talk about topics around this area.

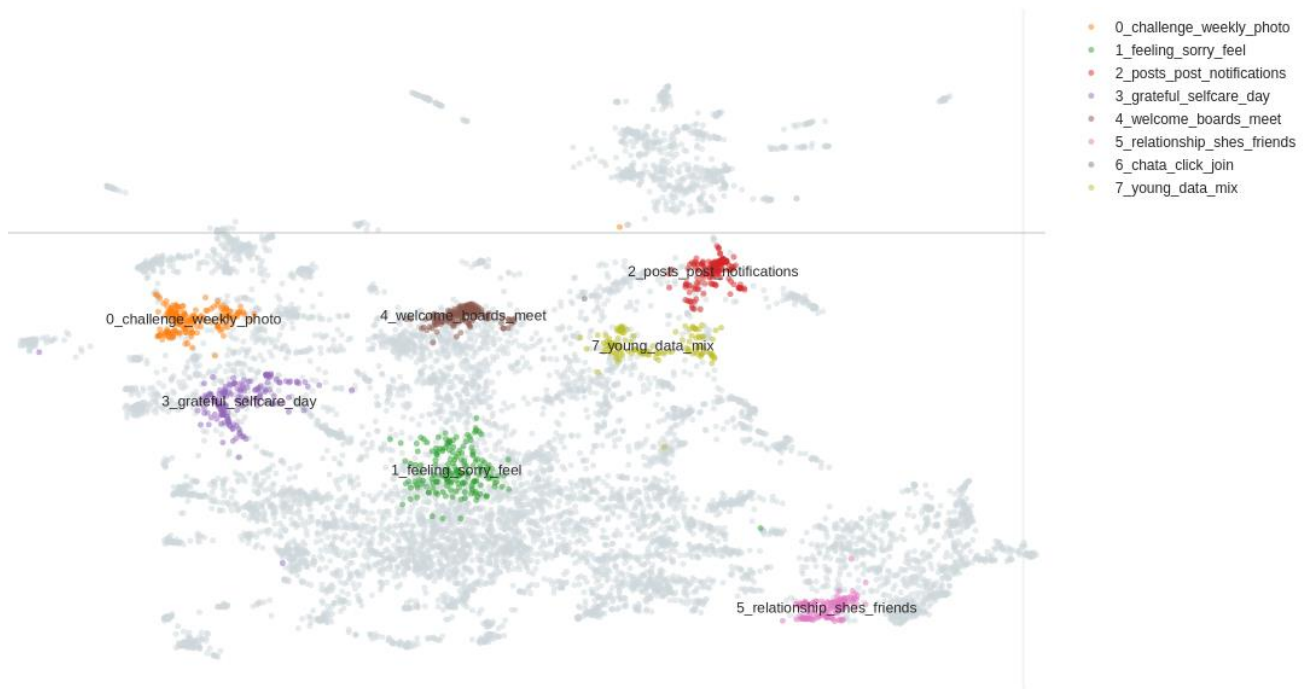


Figure 3 – Thread distribution by topic

The keywords with the highest log-ratio are shown in figure 4. We can see that certain positive terms like hugs and chat occurring more frequently than we would expect, indicating a level of positivity and support on the forums. We can also see terms like scared, bullying and stressful are particularly key as well – these are likely incitive of people using the forums a lot for help seeking to deal with various problems that are described by these terms. Less key, but also notable are words like counselling, info, helpline which indicate that users are actively giving advice to those who are coming to the forum for help with problems. Two keywords were removed from the word cloud because they were names of the moderators, although the fact that these were frequently occurring indicates how involved the moderation team are.



Figure 4 – Keywords based on log-ratio score