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SKILLS

**Adolescents
experiencing internet-
related mental health
difficulties: the
benefits and risks of
digital skills**

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Adolescents experiencing internet-related mental health difficulties: the benefits and risks of digital skills

Key points

- Adolescents with mental health difficulties face intense risky situations online with problematic real-world consequences. While they are often digitally skilled, reflexive and supported by peers, adolescents do not feel that parents, educators or clinical professionals understand or respond to their digital problems sensitively or effectively.
- Young people with mental health difficulties tend to take individual responsibility to cope, often privately, with their digital lives. They put considerable efforts into critically analysing the affordances of digital products and services to develop their own specialised digital skills to pursue their interests, mitigate risk and seek support and help.
- Urgent steps are required to regulate and manage the digital environment in ways that vulnerable young people can trust and that meet their diverse and complex needs. Current efforts by public and commercial actors to support young people's digital skills and agency and address their needs appear insufficient, even counterproductive.

Our study

Most research on digital skills concerns typically-developing young people. This project asks whether digital skills, as [conceptualised by the wider ySKILLS project](#), improve or undermine the wellbeing of adolescents with lived experience of diverse mental health difficulties such as self-harm, depression and anxiety, eating disorders, excessive internet use, grooming and sexual abuse.

We ask three research questions:

- What is the relevance of digital skills for adolescents experiencing mental health difficulties in potentially contrasting cultures of childhood?
- What is the role of different dimensions of digital skills and online experiences in aiding or worsening mental health difficulties, and in enabling coping and resilience?
- Does the research lead to recommendations for therapists, mental health professionals, schools, companies, regulators and the public to support adolescents' digital lives?

We conducted in-depth interviews with 62 adolescents aged 12 to 22 years old in Norway and the UK who have experienced mental health problems of varying severity, most of whom had received treatment in the recent past.

“Adolescents with mental health problems are trying very hard to anticipate and cope with the digital threats, upsets, triggering content and extreme events that they encounter online. On the plus side, this means they are developing critical literacy and coping skills that encompass and transcend technical, informational, communication and creation skills. But, they may struggle to put their skills into practice and they feel isolated because it seems their digital lives are off limits for their parents, teachers and therapists.” (Sonia Livingstone, LSE)

Findings:

Digital engagement and mental health

“I think the algorithm or something changed for me. My whole feed was just full of ‘what I eat in a day’. But these people... they were eating such tiny amounts. I’m like 12, thinking about it. I eat three meals and then these people are having a strawberry for brunch.” (girl aged 14, subclinical eating disorder and depressed mood, UK)

“If there is a lot of negativity and everyone seems to have had a really bad day, then it gets you down a little. Especially if you become concerned about something because that will affect your mood.” (girl aged 17, eating disorder and self-harm, Norway)

- Young people actively engage with the digital world, not only utilising its affordances but also shaping its parameters, sometimes going against the grain of what was envisioned by design. This includes their tactics of moving between platforms, curating audiences, and merging app functionalities – often revealing how young people are taking ownership and shaping their online experiences in ways that serve them.
- While many young people are fascinated by the digital affordances of the social media they engage with, for adolescents with mental health problems these affordances can also undermine their wellbeing. They devote considerable efforts to anticipating and managing the potential threats, emotional upsets and extreme events that might occur during their digital lives, as well as searching for recognition and support.
- Platform algorithms are often “out of sync” with and insensitive to the young person’s state of mind or ability to cope, leading to experiences of triggering, unwanted re-exposure, and setbacks. They act as a distorting mirror, magnifying problematic content and pushing young people with mental health vulnerabilities down a spiral of ever more overwhelming, upsetting or extreme content that they find hard to break away from.

The digital skills of adolescents with mental health difficulties

“Say I’ve had a bad day, then I might use my anonymous account. Then I might chat to someone I know well and basically air my problems if I need someone to talk to.” (girl aged 17, eating disorder and self-harm, Norway)

“The first really bad video I saw was maybe a year and a half ago and it was someone shooting themselves...then if Twitter takes down the video, they’ll just send you a link of this app called Dropbox, which downloads any illegal video.” (girl aged 17, eating disorder and domestic abuse, UK)

- The adolescents we spoke to were generally skilled internet users, but sophisticated skills do not necessarily make for better mental health and wellbeing outcomes. It can even result in riskier online engagement, at times breaching young people’s abilities to cope, with detrimental consequences.
- Adolescents with mental health difficulties are developing particular digital skills that encompass technical, informational, communication and creation skills but also go beyond them: for example, the skill of identifying a callous algorithm, recognising an extreme space or a dangerous person or, more positively, knowing how to game the algorithm to make one’s feed positive or locate ‘safe’ spaces or trustworthy people.

- Given the challenges these adolescents face, they do not always manage to gain the needed skills, nor put them into practice. This can leave them feeling very much on their own, having to self-regulate and rely on their own resources when engaging with a world – digital and beyond – which can be ambiguous, uncertain, unsupportive or worse.
- The mastery of technical, informational, communication and creation skills is not sufficient to understand “at-risk” behaviours and mental health outcomes. We need a good understanding of the psychosocial context and the developmental needs of each adolescent, and to situate their digital experiences in the context of their wider lives.

Barriers to developing digital skills and resilience

“Someone is swearing at you on Snapchat... You get afraid, you get scared, anxiety starts going through the roof, what do I do know, how am I going to deal with it? This guy is swearing at me, I hate my life. Then you start going through low mood swings.” (boy aged 18, anxiety, UK)

“Even with people I choose not to be with, they post a story on Snapchat or Instagram and then you feel left out... But I just try to block it out and forget it. I do it on purpose. I’m pretty good at that – I just block out dumb stuff because then I forget it and can’t talk about it.” (boy aged 19, online sexual abuse, cyberbullying, anxiety and depression, Norway)

- Young people report dynamic journeys in and out of harmful situations – digital or otherwise. These unfold over time and on interlocking timescales (minutes, weeks, years). While their digital journeys are linked to fluctuations in mental health, these journeys contribute to the development of resilience. Experiences of hardship were often understood as part of growing up in a digital world: we heard stories of expanding understanding and competence, growing confidence and maturity, and developing self-efficacy and resilience. Yet, these stories also revealed episodes of struggle, relapse and “failure” to cope, and of a later recognition of harmful impact.
- Adolescents’ digital encounters are often social and collaborative – they share insights, tips and tactics with online peers or niche online communities in ways that offer support and facilitate coping, although they can also reinforce mental health problems. Yet, leaving even unhelpful communities or problematic online spaces may be experienced as a betrayal of that community, adding to the isolation of young people as they tend to experience the digital world in relational terms. Hence digital engagement may offer a welcome break but also tends to be difficult and short-lived.
- Finding a way out of difficult situations seems mostly to be a lonely endeavour. We were rarely told that adolescents sought help or advice when they were in trouble. Our participants talked of active strategies of avoidance and developing digital skills designed to keep their experiences secret from parents, teachers, therapists and even peers. Contrary to popular belief, this was less because they did not know who to ask for help or because they were afraid of not being believed and more to do with feeling shame and guilt for engaging in risky behaviour, fearing that adults would not understand and could not be trusted, or being afraid of the consequences. The advice given by adults was widely regarded as unrealistic or out of touch, failing to understand young people’s digital commitments, however risky.

Calls for action

1. **Clinicians, safeguarding and mental health practitioners** must engage with the richly diverse digital lives of the young people accessing their service and proactively address the potential for both risks and opportunities. Few told their therapist about difficult online experiences. Some did not want to share or quit the risk involvement – involvement with risk content may be a way to explore oneself in relation to peers and to represent aspects of their identity. Direct questions about at-risk behaviour showing empathy, understanding and genuine interest can reduce shame and lower the threshold for disclosure and sharing. This will require training and digital skills for practitioners, as well as changes to their routine practices of youth consultation and support, to ensure that they inquire into, reflect upon and advocate therapeutic strategies regarding adolescents' digital as well as in-person lives.
2. **Educators** should take a multidimensional approach to digital skills, going beyond simple technical advice and safety messaging and offer meaningful, relatable support for their students. For example, education on algorithm literacy is now essential, recognising that this might be vital for young people's wellbeing and safety. A trauma-informed approach is needed to understand the specific needs of at-risk and vulnerable adolescents, to promote resilience and help-seeking, to respond to online challenging behaviours from peers, and overcome digital and social exclusion.
3. **Public health messaging** for children and young people, parents and caregivers, and the general public, should move beyond simplistic safety advice and offer support on managing interpersonal stress and trauma. It should recognise the diverse pressures on young people in both their in-person and digital lives, ease the process of sharing and reporting online problems without shame, and avoid blaming them for digitally-mediated difficulties. It should build on insights from children and young people regarding what works for them and the support they call for.
4. **Industry and tech companies** should anticipate and empathise with the diversity of their users, providing in particular for those who are vulnerable and at risk. They should proactively and preventatively work to reduce risk features and timely deal with perpetrators using restorative approaches for minors. This could include content that facilitates mental health literacy and the recognition of a harmful event, making privacy settings easier, facilitating reporting and take-down of problematic content, providing just-in-time support and safe spaces, and curbing the operation of harmful algorithms that promote upsetting and extreme content.
5. **Government** should provide expertise, training and, above all, sufficient funding for mental health services so that children and young people can be confident of timely and appropriate therapy and support as needed for any and all difficulties they may encounter. But, critically, mental health services must now engage with the digital lives of their users as much as they would address offline factors that contributed to their mental health needs. Governments should also ensure that educators, law enforcement and other relevant professionals are able to support vulnerable and at-risk adolescents in their digital lives. Thirdly, they should consider regulation to curb the excessive risks posed to young people's safety by the actions of commercial providers of digital products and services, especially the large platforms.