



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

PLATFORM POWER AND EXPERIENCES FROM THE MARGIN: ADOLESCENTS' ONLINE VULNERABILITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Extended abstract

In the age of algorithms and platform power, the internet no longer works the same way for everyone. Each user is presented with their own version of the digital environment, shaped in opaque ways by their engagement according to the commercial interests of the platforms and their partners. Superficially, the opportunities afforded by the digital environment seem endless – for learning, entertainment, socialising, civic participation, and for playfully creating our own unique digital persona. However, beneath the surface, powerful algorithms analyse our activities, make choices for us, and present us with a profiled, digitally analysed version of ourselves, monetised by unknown third parties, stored and archived for times to come, and with no opt-out for the user.

Suggested Citation: Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., Stånicke, L.I., Jessen, R.S., Graham, R., Staksrud, E., and Jensen, T.K. (2022, November) *Platform Power and Experiences from the Margin: Adolescents' Online Vulnerability and Mental Health*. Paper (or panel) presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Platforms generally assume by default that the user is a competent adult and they have proved resistant to recognising that a sizable number of their users are children, including those in vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances. Companies rarely see it as in their commercial interests to anticipate or build provisions for users who cannot withstand the risky-by-design tactics of their algorithmically-led functionality for connecting, sharing and recommending content and contact (5Rights Foundation 2021; Livingstone and Stoilova 2021). What does this mean for vulnerable adolescents who are already struggling with their mental health?

On the one hand, there is growing academic research that the use of the internet and social media can increase the risks for already vulnerable children (Stoilova et al. 2021). On the other hand, research also shows that the uses of digital technologies can be beneficial for adolescents' mental health. The online environment can be a source of formal and informal support to cope with difficult experiences and it can afford just-in-time support and help which, even, positively benefits from an environment tailored to the individual needs of the user.

Research on the critical question of what makes a difference between the digital pathways to wellbeing or harm is very limited, however. In this paper, we ask: How can we understand the digital engagement practices of adolescents with lived experience of mental health problems, and what is the role of different types of engagement with digital technologies for their mental health?

We conducted cross-national comparative qualitative research with 62 young people aged 12 to 22 years from Norway and the UK facing internet-related difficulties, including adolescents with experiences of excessive internet use, self-harm or pro-eating disorder content online, cyberbullying or online sexual exploitation and grooming. The research participants were found to have varying kinds and levels of mental health difficulties; some were receiving specialised mental health support because of a clinical diagnosis, while by comparison others faced more occasional or milder forms of mental health needs. All the young people had been exposed to potentially problematic forms of digital content, contact or conduct, and most had not had the opportunity to discuss this with professionals, even when they were in treatment from professional services. The in-depth interviews, focusing on the relationship between digital technology and mental health, were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this paper, we report on our findings and insights into the role of different dimensions of digital engagement in aiding or worsening internet-related mental health difficulties. We discuss firstly the role of digital engagement for young people's mental health and secondly whether digital skills can improve young people's outcomes. Thirdly, we explore the role of engaging with risky-by-design affordances.

Digital engagement and mental health

Young people actively engage with the digital world. They utilise its affordances and shape its parameters, sometimes going against the grain of what was envisioned by design and regulation. This includes their tactics of moving between platforms, curating

audiences, and merging app functionalities. Such tactics reveal how young people are taking ownership and shaping their online experiences in ways that serve them.

Young people's 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.

But for adolescents with mental health difficulties online engagement can also undermine their wellbeing. Online communities can become toxic, helpful material can be mixed with triggering content, coping can be isolating. Hence digital engagement may offer a welcome break but also tends to be difficult and short-lived.

So, young people 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.

They report dynamic journeys in and out of harmful situations linked to fluctuations in mental health. Still, these journeys may 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 the harmful impact. Hence, young people may know about but cannot always deal with the risks they encounter. Is this because they lack digital skills that could have helped them avoid risks in the first place?

Digital skills and mental health difficulties

There were varying levels of skill amongst the participants with younger adolescents being, as a whole, less competent than the older ones, gradually developing digital skills over time. Yet overall, the young people we spoke to were fairly highly skilled with sophisticated knowledge of the digital ecology.

We also found that young people 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.

But sophisticated skills do not necessarily make for better mental health and wellbeing outcomes. One important reason for this is that digital skills are thoroughly entwined with the psychosocial life skills that adolescents are simultaneously developing, including through their lived experience of mental health difficulties. Given the challenges they face, young people do not always manage to put their skills into practice, especially if a mental health difficulty impacts upon their functioning.

Furthermore, the development of digital skills amongst adolescents takes place in the context of a complex developmental period, characterised by exploration, risk-taking and vulnerability. Some young people were acting against their own knowledge of what's safe or sensible (e.g., taking risks or daring themselves). This may not reflect a lack of skill or an irrational response but, rather, a different or extended set of digital skills and purposes.

However, we also found that it is not only about the level of youth digital skills. Independent of digital skill, affordances may result in even riskier online engagement shaped by the operation of algorithms. At times this can breach young people's abilities to counteract and to cope with detrimental consequences.

Engaging with the risky-by-design affordances

The digital environment presents an ever-changing and sometimes problematic set of challenges for adolescents with mental health difficulties. These challenges arise because digital design and platform policies shape the activities of young people and others they might interact with. Such challenges test young people's digital skills and at times their skills are insufficient to the task, resulting in unhappy or harmful experiences.

In addition, platform algorithms are often "out of sync" with and insensitive to the young person's current state of mind or ability to cope. This leads to experiences of triggering, unwanted re-exposure, and setbacks. Algorithms act as a distorting mirror, magnifying problematic content and may push 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.

Several adolescents described becoming aware of how social media algorithms promote problematic content. Recognising one's own triggers and how they arise is a kind of digital skill that combines self-knowledge with an understanding of the digital ecology. But it's also a task that's hard to do.

Not only can it be difficult to anticipate such triggering content, but the activities of others can seem to normalise viewing extreme or 'toxic' content, adding peer pressure to accept rather than avoid challenging content. The more young people engage with this content, the more it becomes a trend – portraying a negative world that feels difficult to escape.

Conclusions and recommendations

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 acknowledge, understand or respond to their digital problems sensitively or effectively.

Current efforts by public and commercial actors to support young people's digital skills and agency and address their needs appear insufficient, even counterproductive. 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. To take steps in

the right direction, we argue that mental health practitioners should get to know about young people's diverse digital experiences, while teaching should cover different types of digital skills, not just technical training or e-safety messages. Industry and tech companies ought to design with young people and their specific needs in mind and limit the risky - by-design features. Governments have the responsibility to consider regulations to limit the excessive risks posed to young people's safety by the actions of commercial providers.

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