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The internet and young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN): Risk and safety



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the understanding of online risks by young people with Additional Support Needs and this group's ability to manage these risks. Six focus groups with 36 young people (13–18) were run in local schools. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Framework Analysis. Two themes were identified 'Identity and Connectedness' and 'Issues relating to Risk'. The theme 'Issues relating to Risk' is presented in the current article. Results showed that young people with ASN are aware of a range of risks online and have developed some strategies to manage these. Issues including supervision and the diverse range of ability within the population are also shown to present barriers to ensuring online safety. The results were discussed in light of literature relating to online risk, safety and potential psychological impact indicating that the internet may also provide important opportunities for young people with ASN to improve psychological well-being.

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1. Introduction

The use of the internet by children and adolescents is growing rapidly and is considered to be a major part of children's everyday lives (Ólafsson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013). Findings show that 93% of American 12–17 year olds were using the internet in 2009 (Lenhart & Graziano, 2001), and 60% of a pan-European sample of young people (aged 9–16) were shown to be online almost every day (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011). The impact of internet use has been of considerable interest in recent literature; including investigation into its potential emotional and psychosocial benefits (Tynes, 2007). However, online risk and the negative psychological impact of the internet on young people remains a concern (Department for Children & Families, 2008).

Livingstone and Smith (2014) reviewed research published since 2008, and concentrated on high quality, empirical studies to examine the nature, prevalence and management of sexual and aggressive risks in the digital age. They found that cyberbullying, contact with strangers, sexual messaging (sexting) and pornography generally affect fewer than one in five adolescents. They conclude that while not all online risks result in self-reported

harm, longitudinal studies do indicate a range of adverse emotional and psychosocial consequences, which suggest that some children are more vulnerable than others. Vulnerability may relate to personality, social and digital factors. However, much of the research on online risk is quantitative, and as noted by Smahel and Wright (2014), is aimed at understanding prevalence, definitions and measurement of risks and their psychosocial consequences. There have been fewer research studies that have examined these issues from the perspective of young people. Smahel and Wright's (2014) study used focus group methodology with children from nine European countries, from different social and cultural backgrounds, and from mainstream schools or youth centres.

1.1. Young people with Additional Support Needs

Although research relating to internet risk and safety in the mainstream population is increasing (Ólafsson et al., 2013), less work has been conducted looking at these issues in young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN). The terms ASN and Special Educational Needs (SEN) are used to describe a group of young people who experience a range of difficulties (Del-Manso, Bailey, Hughes, Findlater, & Findlater, 2011) including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other more general social and cognitive deficits, which as a

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result require the provision of additional support and input within the education system (Education Act, 1996; The Scottish Government, 2004). The term ASN will be used within the current paper to describe individuals who fall within this category. It has been documented that individuals with ASN may constitute as much as 20% of young people within education (Westwood, 2011), although it would appear that in the UK the number of children with Special Educational Needs decreased from 1.55 million pupils (18.7%) in 2013 to 1.49 million pupils (17.9%) in 2014. This is part of a continuing decline since 2010 when 21.1% of pupils had SEN (Department for Education, 2014). However, the percentage of pupils with statements of SEN across all schools in England has remained unchanged in recent years (Department for Education, 2013).

Recent research has indicated that a high percentage of the ASN population are making use of advances in technology for learning, socialising and entertainment, similar to that of other young people (Cerebra, 2012; Del-Manso et al., 2011; Didden, Scholte, Korzilius, De Moor, Vermeulen, O'Reilly & Lancioni, 2009). This includes: children with ADHD; Asperger's Syndrome (Kowalski & Fedina, 2011); Intellectual Disabilities (ID) and developmental disabilities (Didden et al., 2009). Didden et al. (2009) documented the types of activities young people, aged 9–16 and with intellectual and developmental disabilities, were engaging in online. This included using it as a forum for communication through webcam (28% of the sample), email (43%) and Skype (12%), suggesting that this reflects both synchronous and asynchronous communication (McKenzie & Murray, 2011).

Livingston, Görzig & Ólafsson (2011) highlighted however, increased risk levels for young people who were reported to have some form of disability (48%), for example learning difficulties, when compared to all young people included in the sample (41%). In addition it was stated that this group can experience greater levels of distress if meeting an online contact offline. One such risk relates to cyberbullying, with Didden et al. (2009) stating that 9% of their sample of 114 young people aged between 12 and 19 with a range of developmental disabilities reported having been bullied online one or more times per week. In another sample, Cross, Piggan, Douglas, and Vonkaenel-Flatt (2012) found that 16% of a UK sample of young people with ASN were found to be at risk of persistent cyberbullying over a prolonged period. Cyberbullying may be a source of distress for the ASN population as findings showed that within the sample recruited by Didden et al. (2009), higher rates of cyberbullying were correlated with lower levels of self-esteem and higher reported depressive feelings. Research has also indicated that young people with ASN may be at increased online risk in comparison to those without ASN. Reasons for this may include the group's social naivety (Cerebra, 2012) and range of cognitive deficits, which can impact on their ability to generalise safety strategies and consider long-term consequences of behaviour (Carr, 2006; Mayes & Calhoun, 2007; Westwood, 2011). Further to this, young people with a range of disabilities may be more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour than those without (McNamara & Willoughby, 2010).

Del-Manso et al. (2011) employed focus groups to explore internet use by seven females with ASN (aged 13–16) and their understanding of the related benefits and risks. This study demonstrated that while the girls had been taught internet safety rules, many did not fully understand them or showed a lack of understanding in relation to putting safety strategies in place. This study also included a discussion group with parents and teachers. The adults recruited emphasised that the ASN population were particularly vulnerable online for reasons including their being

less able to pick up on social cues and to consider the consequences of their actions, as well as being more impulsive. Such difficulties have been suggested to put this group at higher risk when socially interacting online (Didden et al., 2009; Mitchell, Becker-Blease, & Finkelhor, 2005; Wiener & Mak, 2009). Kowalski and Fedina (2011) also felt that young people with ASN may be at greater risk simply because their additional needs cause them to “stand out”.

1.2. Rationale for study

Research suggests that children and young people are faced with a range of online risks, which may have negative short and long term consequences for psychological well-being. Young people with ASN may also be at increased risk when interacting online, however, there has been limited research into this area. Despite young people with ASN increasingly making use of advances in technology, there remains a lack of research investigating how young people with ASN may both perceive and manage potential risks.

The young people with ASN in the current study included those who fell into the Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) and Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEB) categories as documented in *The Highland Practice Model (2012)*. Those selected were considered particularly important to consider due to documented difficulties 'offline' such as developing friendships (Bellini, 2004; Carr, 2006) as well as experiencing a range of cognitive impairments e.g., impulsivity (Carr, 2006; Fuster, 2002; Mayes & Calhoun, 2007; Westwood, 2011). Furthermore, teaching staff who were consulted did not distinguish between individuals falling within each of these three categories but instead considered them to be unified as a result of a common set of uses and challenges related to their online behaviour.

This study therefore aimed to add to the existing literature by taking a child-centred approach and asking what young people with ASN perceived as online risks. The study will explore the following questions:

1. What risks do young people with ASN identify online which may impact on their psychological well-being?
2. How are young people with ASN managing online risk?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Thirty-six adolescents (29 male) aged 13–18 years were included in a total of six focus groups. This reflects the gender distribution within the schools as boys are two and a half times more likely to have statements of SEN at primary schools and nearly three times more likely to have statements at secondary schools compared to girls (Department for Education, 2014). All participants had some form of Additional Support Needs (ASN).

2.2. Design and procedure

The study employed a qualitative design, using Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) to analyse data collected from six focus groups. Focus groups are collective discussions that aim to explore a particular set of issues, where the interaction and discussion that occurs between group members is key in the generation of data (Kitzinger, 1995). As a result it may be considered that

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