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Online social networking and psychological experiences: The perceptions of young people with mental health difficulties

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study explores the interaction between online social networking experiences and wellbeing in 12 young people accessing mental health services.

Methods: Data from semi-structured interviews was analysed using Grounded Theory methodology.

Results: “Threats and judgement” and “connection and support” were experienced by adolescents, facilitated by having continuous access to a vast social network. These experiences influenced adolescents’ psychological wellbeing, mediated by their responses to threat and judgement and maintaining “safe sharing” with their network. Social network use was conceived as a gamble of balancing its potentially positive and negative impact in a culture in which social network use appears to be unavoidable.

Conclusions: The findings indicate the importance of routine assessment and formulation of social networking use in understanding adolescents’ psychological distress. Furthermore, a range of opportunities exist for clinicians to utilise the anonymity and peer support that social networks offer to broaden the range of mental health services offered to young people.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is considered a critical period for young people’s physical, cognitive and social development (Steinberg, 2010). With the rise of the internet and social networking sites (SNS), in the developed world there has been an unprecedented shift in adolescents’ patterns of social interaction and the culture in which they live. Twelve to fifteen year olds in the UK now spend an average of 18.9 h online each week, a figure which has more than doubled since 2005 (Ofcom, 2015). A review in 2013 found that, in the UK specifically, 85% of 12–15 year olds access their main SNS profile every day and 20% do so more than ten times a day, facilitated by the increasing use of mobiles and tablets to gain access (Ofcom, 2013).

Adolescence also marks a time in which there is a sharp increase in the prevalence of mental health difficulties. For example, an epidemiological study in the US (Merikangas et al., 2010) indicated

that over 45% of 13–18 year olds have experienced a mental health difficulty in their lifetime, with over 20% of these being classed as a “severe disorder”.

1.1. The challenges and opportunities associated with SNS use

Research has responded to the growth and spread of social networking in recent years, exploring how SNS are used by different groups (e.g. Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011; Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014) and the benefits and risks associated with SNS (e.g. Ahn & Shin, 2013; Müller et al., 2016; Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone., 2013). In relation to adolescents’ wellbeing, SNS have been found to offer both challenges and opportunities.

1.1.1. Social relationships

In their nature as tools for socialising, SNS offer access to the personal information and daily activities of a vast number of others in a way that has never previously been possible. The process of seeking and sharing information has been the interest of many authors, often in relation to the “online disinhibition effect”, the finding that individuals typically disclose more personal

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information and seek more private information from others than they would offline (Suler, 2004).

Social relationships can act as a protective factor against mental health difficulties through providing emotional support (Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010) and creating a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013). For example, a longitudinal study by Rafnsson, Shankar, and Steptoe (2015) found that the size of, and frequency of contact with, their social network predicted an individual's future wellbeing. In contrast, abusive or rejecting relationships can influence young people's beliefs about themselves as lovable or worthwhile people and can violate the norms of trust, respect and reciprocity expected in social relationships (Bretherton, Munholland, Cassidy, & Shaver, 1999).

There is ongoing debate about whether SNS strengthen or erode social relationships. SNS use has been found to interfere with typical family activities, including impairing parent-child communication (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Connecting with others on SNS has been found to have no impact on overall social isolation (Ahn & Shin, 2013), can lead to the avoidance of problems in the "real world" (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009) and to a lack of quality connections offline, which in turn has been linked to depression and further social isolation (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Nevertheless, SNS can also facilitate involvement in community activities (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), and, for some, the opportunity to experience social support in a way that they might have previously been unable to access (Ofcom, 2013).

1.1.2. Identity development

Through social relationships, adolescents learn to adjust their self-presentation based upon the reactions of others, which begins a process of rehearsing and integrating those elements of the self that will ultimately form their social identity (Schlenker, 1986). Indeed, one study found that in their offline social networks, adolescents formed relationships with those who had similar degrees of hopefulness (Parker et al., 2015). If, as developmental theorists suggest, young people are more likely to integrate aspects of themselves into their identity that are positively responded to by others (Steinberg, 2010) the continuous feedback from other users on SNS might be central to their developing identities.

1.1.3. Online communication and associated risks

Valkenburg and Peter (2011) suggest that online communication facilitates and encourages the sharing of personal information through three unique features, "anonymity" (no immediate feedback to communication), "asynchronization" (editing and conscious consideration of the information offered), and "accessibility" (the opportunity to interact with a vastly increased number of people). The anonymity of the internet has been associated with an array of risks for young people, including "grooming", exposure to sexual content, "surveillance behaviour" in romantic relationships and cyberbullying (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Staksrud, Ólafsson, & Livingstone, 2013). Researchers suggest that the nature of online communication serves to increase the risk of cyberbullying through encouraging disinhibition and deindividuation as there is no capacity for the perpetrator to witness the victim's response (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013). A recent review of studies suggests that around one quarter of adolescents have experienced cyber-bullying (Hamm et al., 2015), experiences that have been associated with depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and suicidal ideation (Hamm et al., 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

1.1.4. Mental health

SNS use has been associated with correlates of psychological distress in young people; for example, adolescents' intense use of

SNS correlates with low self-esteem (Müller et al., 2016). The availability of information about others' lives and activities also encourages negative social comparisons in which young people believe that others' lives are happier and better than their own (Chou & Edge, 2012) contributing to depressive symptoms through rumination (Feinstein et al., 2013). SNS are increasingly used for posts relating to self-harming behaviours and suicidal ideation (Lewis, Heath, Michal, & Duggan, 2012), although further research is needed to clarify the relationship between expressed ideation and at-risk behaviours (Cash, Thelwall, Peck, Ferrell, & Bridge, 2013).

1.1.5. Opportunities

Despite the possible risks of SNS, SNS use has also been associated with positive outcomes including increased creativity, self-expression (Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, & Third, 2011) and peer relationships with previously inaccessible groups, which in turn may enhance wellbeing (Ahn & Shin, 2013; Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2013). As the risks and opportunities associated with SNS are thought to be interdependent (Collin et al., 2011), it is necessary to help young people develop skills to manage the risks so they may benefit from the positive opportunities that SNS can offer.

1.2. Clinical populations

There is currently a dearth of research in areas which might help us better understand the complex relationship between SNS use and psychological distress. The SNS experiences of clinical populations are under-researched (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012), and these may differ from those of the general population. In addition, research into SNS use has tended to focus on the links between use and pre-defined psychosocial concepts. Given the complexity of this phenomenon, qualitative research which explores people's lived experiences of SNS and perceptions of its impact upon their psychological health will help provide us with a more complete picture of the processes at work. In clinical populations, such knowledge will also help clinicians identify the "protective" and "risk" facets of SNS use and assist in planning and delivering effective psychological interventions.

1.3. Aims

In this study we explore how young people with mental health difficulties perceive the relationship between their SNS use and their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Our aim was to develop an initial theoretical model based on the young people's understanding of how their SNS interactions might impact upon their distress and wellbeing. A grounded-theory informed analysis was utilised to generate this model. Our primary research question was "What are young people's perceptions of how SNS use interacts with their wellbeing and distress?" Within this broad question we were also interested in addressing the secondary question "How do young people use SNS for self-disclosure and self-presentation in relation to their emotional experiences?"

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Recruitment strategy

Participants were recruited from community child and adolescent mental health services in England. Inclusion criteria were:

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