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Can platform literacy protect vulnerable young people against the risky affordances of social media platforms?

Sonia Livingstone [a], Reidar Schei Jessen [b], Mariya Stoilova [a], Line Indrevoll Stänicke [b], Richard Graham [c], Elisabeth Staksrud [d] and Tine Jensen [b]

[a]Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK; [b]Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway; [c]stem4, London, UK; [d]Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

A qualitative study of young people with mental health difficulties sought to understand their digital experiences and identify whether their digital literacy helps them cope with online problems. The findings reveal how young people's encounters with extreme online risk are amplified by platforms' promotion of trending and viral content and intensified through the personalisation of content that can 'trigger' individual vulnerabilities. We conceptualise these twin processes in terms of risky affordances and show how young people are becoming hypervigilant in their efforts to understand them and take anticipatory and remedial action. In the process, they gain platform literacy, a form of digital literacy that responds to the challenges posed by platform architecture and business models and encompasses data and algorithm literacies. Specifically, young people gained platform literacy by critically examining and comparing social media platforms for their risky features at the interface (on the screen), business operation, and user support (beyond the screen). There were indications that this learning was facilitated by peer discussion, shared experimentation and reflexive deliberation about how their digital experiences relate to their individual biographies. When efforts to manage these risky affordances failed, the young people tended to blame themselves. However, they expected society to support them through improved digital literacy education, clinical support and platform regulation and design. Such systemic changes are vital if vulnerable youth are not to be left responsible for coping with the effects of powerful digital platforms on their mental health.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the social media experiences and digital literacy of young people with mental health difficulties. Most research on the possible relation between social

CONTACT Sonia Livingstone s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

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media use and mental health has been conducted with the general youth population (Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2023), notwithstanding lively academic (Odgers & Jensen, 2020) and policy debates (Murthy, 2023). Similarly, most research on digital literacy has been conducted with the general population, with little known regarding vulnerable groups (although, see Hietajärvi et al., 2024; Mascheroni et al., 2022). This may be because digital literacy is typically framed in terms of generic education or workplace skills. Yet there is little evidence that such generic skills improve wellbeing outcomes (Livingstone et al., 2021), and it may be that new forms of digital literacy are emerging to navigate social media platforms, especially among vulnerable users. Taking an exploratory approach, this article investigates vulnerable young people's experiences of the risky digital affordances of social media platforms, and second, whether these experiences are linked to the development of distinct digital literacies.

Our focus on young people with mental health difficulties is grounded in an account of vulnerability, theorised as a greater susceptibility to being influenced and harmed by risks. This account recognises that mental health difficulties are inherently distressing, even devastating, and they may impair life chances in the long term. Adolescents with mental health difficulties are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, violence, stigma, educational difficulties, risk-taking and physical ill-health. Their difficulties may stem from biological factors such as genetics and pre/postnatal development or social factors, including social deprivation, marginalisation, adverse childhood experiences or environmental stressors (Rutter, 2013; Scambler, 2019). Research shows multiple ways in which these risks are increasingly entwined with digital engagement, although, at the same time, vulnerable youth can have a distinctive need for internet access, including social media, for information, belonging, and social and professional support (Hollis et al., 2020; Orben et al., 2024). Indeed, as digital technologies become 'embedded, embodied and everyday' (Hine, 2015), relied upon for learning, information, communication, health, participation and work (Plantin et al., 2018), societal approaches are required that support young people rather than simply restrict their access. In framing this article in terms of vulnerability, our intent is not to deny the voices or capacities of these young people but to recognise their right to participate in the digital world and their legitimate call on public policy and resources, along with the calls of other vulnerable groups (Tobin, 2015).

In such a context of rapid commercial and technological innovation, enhancing users' digital literacy has become an important policy goal, variously advocated by educators, regulators struggling to regulate global platforms, and parents who hope schools can help their children manage online opportunities and risks. Can digital literacy be a protective factor in supporting them and contributing to their resilience? Coping and resilience have long been researched under the umbrella of digital literacy (Vandoninck et al., 2012; Vissenberg et al., 2022), although the limits to young people's capacities to cope in a digital world are not well understood (Idelji-Tehrani et al., 2022). Their capacities are challenged by the design and operation of social media *platforms,* which not only host and share content but also algorithmically promote personalised content to users according to a commercial 'winner takes all' logic. Helmond (2015, p. 8) explained that platforms are programmable multi-sided markets which

> provide a technological framework for others to build on, geared toward connecting to and thriving on other websites, apps and their data. At the same time, readying external data for their own databases is central to the economic model of social media platforms.

According to this 'double logic of platformization' (p. 8), business interests generally trump user interests in shaping platform design and operation (Hartford & Stein, 2022).

Of particular concern, especially for vulnerable young people, are the 'risky' affordances of risky-by-design platforms (Jaynes & Wick, 2020), such as those which automate individually targeted pathways to increasingly extreme content, contact and conduct (5Rights, 2021) or promote 'dark' or deceptive patterns of system design (Norwegian Consumer Council, 2018). While the concept of risk does not imply the inevitability of harm but instead refers to its probability and severity (Livingstone, 2013), the concept of affordance also avoids assumptions about the inevitability of technological effects, recognising how objects, such as social media platforms, 'request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse' (Davis & Chouinard, 2016, p. 241) particular action possibilities in ways that accord with the perceptions, interests and circumstances of the users. Reducible neither to the features of the technology (e.g., privacy settings, networked connectivity) nor the actions of users (e.g., using a false identity, sharing secrets), affordances such as anonymity enable and constrain different kinds of communication online (Evans et al., 2017) in ways that are always context-dependent (hence Costa's (2018) emphasis on the relational notion of 'affordances-in-practice').

Risky affordances have long been interpreted and discussed by young people who may even perceive them as opportunities to exercise agency and gain resilience in the face of danger (Livingstone, 2014). Helpful here is the observation by Nagy and Neff (2015) that digital users formulate lay theories of digital systems (often concerning the operation of features at the interface as well as the data flows and business models that lie beyond the screen), generating 'imagined affordances' – and sometimes urban myths – that help account for the variability in people's digital experiences. While the original theory of affordances was non-cognitive, this emphasis on imagination allows us to link the analysis of platform design with digital literacy. Nagy and Neff suggest that the knowledge that an algorithm manages one's social media feed changes its imagined affordances (though not its technical features), changing the possibilities for user actions. Bucher (2017) calls this users' 'algorithmic imaginary,' while digital literacy scholars propose the phenomenon of algorithm literacy (Frau-Meigs, 2024; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Neubaum, 2023). With further innovation in the digital environment, new forms of digital literacy are emerging (Davis & Chouinard, 2016), including not only algorithm literacy but also data literacy (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020) and AI literacy (Selwyn, 2022). Since platforms monetise digital engagement in ways fuelled by users' data, directed by algorithms, and automated by AI, we gather together these multiple forms of knowledge and skill under the umbrella term of platform literacy (Ha & Kim, 2024). Contributing to research on digital literacy, we highlight how platform literacy – a detailed and up-to-date understanding of the design and operation of current social media platforms – emerges from processes of exploration and experimentation with and across different platforms. But, the findings also show the limitations of this capacity, raising further questions about the emerging societal balance between regulation of and education about the digital environment in meeting the needs of vulnerable youth.

Methods

For a project on the digital skills of European adolescents, we conducted in-depth interviews with 62 young people aged 12–22 in Norway (N = 30: 27 women and three men) and the UK (N = 32: 19 women and 13 men) who were known to have or who disclosed during the interviews experience of mental health difficulties of varying type and severity (Livingstone et al., 2022). The countries were chosen for their contrasting cultures of childhood and approaches to internet governance (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009), although in both, young people face significant mental health issues. In Norway, national self-report data from 2023 show that 10% of boys and 25% of girls aged 16–19 report high levels of mental health problems (Bakken, 2023). In the UK, 'one in six children aged 6–16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021, a huge increase from one in nine in 2017' (COYL, 2022, p. 10).

The research was formally approved by the authors' institutional research ethics committee in the UK (LSE reference: 23512/30 July 2021) and, in Norway the collection of personal data was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference: 705571). In Norway, collaboration with a network of local leaders in national child and adolescent mental health clinics enabled the distribution of invitations to participate to young service users. In the UK, recruitment was managed through a collaboration with two organisations specialising in support for young people with mental health difficulties. Despite efforts to recruit an even gender balance, the sample had more female participants. For ethical reasons, recruitment focused on adolescents in the 'recovery stage' or with 'mild symptoms', some of whom were in therapy. We carefully considered each participant's wellbeing throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the caregivers of participants under 16, and we followed ethical guidelines regarding recording, opportunities to withdraw, and data protection. Each participant had an opportunity to discuss possible adverse effects of the interview, although none were reported; each was offered professional follow-up mental health support.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on the young person's preference and the practicalities of research during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK, over half the interviews were conducted online, while most were in person in Norway. They took between 45 and 105 min and were conducted by or in the presence of a mental health professional. Participants were asked open-ended questions about (1) the use of digital platforms, especially social media, and how this may relate to mental health; (2) a challenging situation online to illuminate concrete experiences such as cyberbullying, sexual abuse online, excessive gaming, or self-harm online content; (3) their digital literacies, including how the young people talked about learning – explicitly or implicitly – from their digital experiences; (4) seeking and giving advice when facing challenging situations online, and how policy and support could better enhance digital literacy and reduce online risk.

The interviews were flexibly conducted to follow the flow of the young people's ideas and experiences and to pursue specific issues in greater depth as they arose while ensuring coverage of the interview guide. Each was audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised. The anonymised transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combining inductive and deductive approaches to respect young people's

perceptions and perspectives while pursuing themes relevant to the research questions. Across the Norwegian and British teams, we analysed the interviews individually to become familiar with the transcripts and then together to reach a consensus regarding the emerging findings (Hill et al., 2005). Generally, the interviews revealed similar findings across countries, so we present a common account of how young people engaged with the risky affordances of social media platforms and the digital literacies involved. Each is referred to by gender, age, country, and participant number, and their relevant lived experience or mental health difficulty is noted.

Findings and discussion

The findings revealed that young people engaged with social media platforms to explore their identities and relationships, express themselves, and find validation and belonging. As one 14-year-old girl explained, their learning is social: 'I have met many people on Snap who have experienced a lot of what I have experienced … then it's okay to kind of talk a bit, to find out what feelings you actually have inside you' (F, 14, UK, #1). Young people would occasionally experiment with the risk-taking and even transgressive behaviour that has long characterised adolescence and youth culture (boyd, 2011; Livingstone, 2014; Staksrud, 2013; Stänicke et al., 2025). However, they also prioritised efforts to avoid getting hurt or overwhelmed and to find information or help as needed, given their mental health difficulties. Friends and online social networks were invaluable for social support: 'If I am thinking about something difficult that happened online, I ask one of my friends who has knowledge, and she is also a friend in real life … both of us know what we do on social media' (F, 17, N, #7). These learning motivations intensified their interest in the platforms' specificities, peculiarities and business models, as well as the norms and digital cultures they support.

Awareness of and exposure to extreme digital experiences

While many platform users report extreme experiences at times, the vulnerable young people seemed especially likely to do so and particularly sensitive to them. This fits with prior research findings that vulnerable young people are more exposed to extreme content (e.g., violence, extremism, self-harm), contact (e.g., meeting strangers) and conduct (e.g., sexual harassment) risks (El-Asam et al., 2022) both online and offline (Laurinavičius et al., 2012), and more upset by them (Vandoninck et al., 2012).

Consider the experiences of one young woman, aged 17, with a history of a binge-eating disorder and suicidal behaviour rooted in historical physical and emotional abuse. She described content 'so illegal and weird and freaky that you're surprised that human people even do that' (F, 17, UK, #10). This included videos of a woman with her miscarried baby and 'a man raping a hamster'. Hardly random encounters, these extreme experiences relied on her digitally literate use of multiple platforms – 'TikTok to see what was happening,' Snapchat 'mainly to rant to people,' Instagram for less heated social engagement, Wattpad for 'smut' and to explore sexual feelings, Twitter to share risky videos, and so forth. Not only was she attuned to comparing platform affordances, but she relished her expertise in managing them. Talking about 'videos that are teaching

you how to become anorexic,' she explains how niche online communities evade the platform's content moderation policy:

> So that they don't get taken down, the video itself, what they do is they say look in the comments for this. So, it's just music playing in the background, an empty screen and look at the comments. You open up the comments and the comments section is full of these random people giving you eating disorder tips … And it's like sharing stuff in secret or hidden ways that I've realised, yes, people are really good at finding stuff like that. (F, 17, UK, #10)

On the one hand, her platform literacy enabled her to identify extreme content personalised to her particular biography. On the other hand, the results could be beyond her control, even terrifying: 'You get people reporting you. You get people attacking you. You get people in your DMs [direct messages] telling you to kill yourself and it's really quite intense at times.' At such times, she felt unsupported: though she had sought help from a series of school and external professionals, none had enquired about her online experiences. Still, she interpreted these experiences as a kind of test of her agency and resilience in the new normal of today's digital culture:

> I feel like everyone has a need to see something for themselves. But also, because for some people I know of, I think it's to test their limits. Because it's gotten to the point where everyone's making self-harm jokes or rape is joked about, or everyone knows everything. (F, 17, UK, #10)

The interviews were replete with accounts of extreme experiences. A 19-year-old who had been groomed online and sexually abused in her early teens told us how:

> My friends and I were bored one day long ago, and we went on Omegle. And there was this 12-year-old girl crying with a knife in her hand. It was so horrible! We were shocked. She sat there listening to depressing music crying with this knife. We tried to say, 'this is not the solution, you're such a great person'. And then she just skipped us. And we were like, what do we do now? Should we call someone? What if she kills herself and we were sort of witnesses? (F, 19, NO, #27)

As she implies, despite having her friends to discuss what had happened, she was left feeling simultaneously responsible yet powerless – unable either to intervene or obtain support. Such encounters can leave a lasting impression – as a 16-year-old girl with experience of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) explained, 'Once you see it you can't unsee it, that's with you forever' (F, 16, UK, #9).

Overall, the interview findings suggest that several platform affordances behind the social media business model combine to make these extreme experiences upsetting. The publicity that results from viral or trending content (i.e., content amplified by the platform algorithms) is crucial. Many interviewees echoed the experience of one young woman who said, 'I might open TikTok and there might be a random trending shitty video of something that's trending but in an unhealthy way' (F, 17, UK, #16). Sometimes, the video is extreme: an 18-year-old with probable anxiety disorder and suicidal thoughts told us:

> There was this guy and it's really, really horrible. But he commits suicide on live video … and people were screen recording, so recording their screens. And people posted it all over

> TikTok. Literally really gruesome. It was on TikTok for ages, and I think it took like three, four hours for TikTok to actually take it down. (F, 18, UK, #14)

Not only did she already struggle with suicidal thoughts herself, but the affordances of (perceived) publicity and ubiquity underpinning the business model made the content seem inescapable. She told us of a schoolmate who did not come to school in an attempt to avoid witnessing everybody discussing and distributing the upsetting content. Such highly shared experiences that speak to one's private vulnerabilities are challenging. For these young women, the 'normality' of such extreme experiences makes it an everyday matter to participate in them. At the same time, their vulnerabilities create further necessity to replicate the harmful behaviour – a vicious circle:

> It would be weird if you weren't on social media … So, if they're feeling negative in themselves, or if they're struggling with their mental health, or if they're not in their right mind, then they might post something that's horrible, and trolls and stuff like that.

The seeming indifference of the platform (note how she complains that TikTok took 'hours' to remove the suicide content) adds to both the normalisation of such content and young people's sense that they are left to face it unsupported. Not only did the platform fail to respond as needed on that occasion, but peers can also normalise extreme content precisely by treating it as an everyday matter. A 19-year-old with a history of self-harm was unexpectedly shown potentially harmful content closely tailored to her individual problems; what was almost more shocking to her was that others were seemingly not shocked:

> It could be hash-tagged with a band I like. And then there are hundreds of other hashtags, and coincidentally, one of them is suicidal and self-harm and depression and then suddenly … It was very scary at first. But I got used to it surprisingly quickly. Because … I saw no one else commented on it, right? (F, 19, NO, #8)

Such experiences do not remain online only, and perhaps because of the disturbed nature of some of these young people's offline lives, the boundary is particularly porous, with extreme events readily amplified by the platforms business models and risks linking offline and online. A young woman with autism spectrum disorder who had been sexually abused told us:

> There was a big incident where my assailant threatened to shoot the school. And all of the community Facebook groups were exploding with pictures of him, saying, be careful, he's threatening to do this and that, and it really affected me. Because I was scared, and all of the communities were screaming about him … I was diagnosed with PTSD about three months after. (F, 17, UK, #4)

Troubling relations between online and offline can lead to harmful behaviours among young people. An 18-year-old with experience of online sexual abuse, eating disorders and self-harm told us of a challenging experience:

> It was not planned, but my friend and I ended up drinking a lot of alcohol and taking a lot of Paracetamol [painkillers] together, so that we were brought in an ambulance to the hospital and hospitalised … When we talk about this today, both of us think this was really strange. But then one day she said that at this moment there were a lot of young people who ran away and had taken an overdose together and filmed it and published it on TikTok. She thought

> that was why we did it. At the time, I did not feel influenced by anyone's posts. I thought we were original! (F, 18, NO, #17)

Several observations from the young people reveal advanced platform literacy, recognising how the social media business models and features – hashtags, comments, moderation, sharing – contribute to creating a compelling yet troubling digital culture that is simultaneously extreme and yet normalised, affording experiences that are at once fascinating, all-encompassing, unavoidable and at times overwhelming.

Algorithmic amplification of personal vulnerabilities

The risky platform affordances that promote, normalise and target individual vulnerabilities occupied a fair proportion of the interviews. The young people were keen to share their knowledge of the algorithms that influence their feed and how these are driven by the platforms' business model and the attention economy (Hartford & Stein, 2022; Plantin et al., 2018). Such algorithm literacy is growing among social media users (Frau-Meigs, 2024; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Neubaum, 2023), and this matters especially when the algorithms target users not only for their tastes or shopping habits but for their vulnerabilities, potentially amplifying and monetising (5Rights, 2021; Norwegian Consumer Council, 2018). Although we could not gain direct evidence of whether and how the participants' mental health difficulties shaped the consequences of their digital engagement, it seems that having an anxiety disorder or having suffered extreme circumstances is likely to add intensity to these consequences, motivating them to manage their digital lives as effectively as possible, including in some cases, avoiding or deleting an app for a period.

The term used by young people to express the link between algorithmic functioning and individual vulnerabilities was 'triggering' (Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2023). A 17-year-old explained how

> it can be something so small like if someone says you can't keep your legs closed, you're such a slag. That person might have been raped or sexually assaulted, and that can take that person back to that and then they'll feel guilty and sad again. (F, 17, UK, #5)

This 17-year-old had, in fact, experienced both sexual abuse and self-harm and sees both other users and the platform itself as crossing a line when providing content that is inappropriate for most and positively dangerous for some: 'You see on TikTok that there is people who have fresh cuts and they're taking videos with their fresh self-harm … That is triggering. Young people don't need to see that at all.' Similarly, an 18-year-old with self-harm, anxiety and depressive disorders explained that:

> Say you have mental health issues, and then you see someone hurting themselves. It's like a trigger, and it makes you feel like you want to do it if that makes sense. So, it's really pushing you to the idea of it … (F, 18, UK, #6)

While these examples focus on triggering content shared by other users on the platform, the young people are clear that the platform amplifies this. As one young man explained:

> They start by making a trend. Somebody might, say, put a picture up of a time when you felt really emotional, or sad, or you was going through a breakdown or something … and then when you watch this video people think, oh, this trend's on. I've got a picture when I felt

> emotional, and was going to break down, and when I felt like really, in a really dark place. And then that trend starts getting bigger and bigger. (M, 17, UK, #2)

While some may consider the relation between extreme content, however amplified, and individual vulnerabilities to be merely coincidental or a matter of 'getting into bad company,' others were aware that such content can be personally targeted algorithmically. As the above 18-year-old goes on to say, 'it's like a vicious circle that you can't get out of. Once you're in it, you're in it, you can't get back out of it.' As a 16-year-old girl with a history of sexual abuse followed by PTSD reflected, 'Once you interact with different things, it just kind of tailors to what they think you like, so I think it just becomes more addicting in a way' (F, 16, UK, #9). Listening to their reflections on how the algorithms work, we gained a sense of lively peer conversations as young people deliberate together over how easily one can 'fall down the rabbit hole,' as it is popularly called. As one young woman, aged 19, who had been groomed online and sexually abused in her early teens, explained: 'It's not the same as face to face. You have to be more careful. There are a lot of weird things you need to know. It is a skill to know these things' (F, 19, NO, #27). Young people attempt to be reflexive regarding their personal triggers and make efforts to anticipate and manage the algorithms that may amplify them. Some of the young people were critical of platform business models which rely on the commercialisation of influencer content to thrive:

> Do you honestly think that most people on TikTok showcase things about mental health … just for the sake of helping society out? … Most of these people also have 500,000 followers on TikTok and most of these people have sponsorship brands with other companies … to showcase this app which helps your mental health. They're financially gaining from that … I feel like so many people are not genuine; they're so fake, and people just don't realise. (F, 17, UK, #3)

Others are more cautious in claiming algorithm literacy: 'I definitely think it would be helpful to know what the algorithms pick up in a sense because sometimes it's more like shared interests … But I don't think anyone necessarily knows how it works,' reflected a 15-year-old girl with anxiety disorder (F, 15, UK, #17). While she expresses uncertainty over how 'the algorithm' works, possibly reflecting the opposite effects of trending and personalised 'feeds', a 16-year-old with an eating disorder involved in harmful online activities such as pro-ana and self-harm content confidently framed engagement with algorithms as a matter of informed choice: 'I can move on if I don't want to watch harmful content. Almost everything I see on TikTok is interesting because the algorithms follow what you like. You make a choice when you look at something' (16, F, NO, #4). Concerningly, some blame themselves and their supposed deficiencies rather than blaming other online users' actions or platforms' algorithmic design. Complaining that 'TikTok is the most addictive app ever,' a 14-year-old boy concluded, 'You're always going to see stuff that you don't like … and then you just keep looking at it, you're doing it to yourself. It's your own fault, really' (M, 14, UK, #3).

In a digital environment that no longer merely hosts content but, crucially, relies on automated processes that personalise individuals' content feeds to maximise and monetise their attention (5Rights, 2021; Hartford & Stein, 2022), young people strive to identify and cope with the social media triggers that upset them. This is difficult, requiring both self-knowledge and platform literacy, and some of the experiences the interviewees

described indicated an inability to anticipate or cope with risky platform affordances, even a tendency to self-blame for adverse outcomes.

Developing platform literacy to enhance positive experiences

The young people were strongly motivated to find ways to cope online without leaving social media or living with adverse outcomes. They told us of various platform literacy strategies focused on platform affordances, especially regarding algorithms. Most straightforwardly, young people have learned that 'You should remove it [harmful content] so that you are not affected in that way' (F, 19, NO, #10) and that 'you can take some control if someone posts something you don't like, why should you follow it?' (M, 19, NO, #2). Ways to 'game the algorithm' or 'clean your feed' were advised in multiple interviews, often reflecting lessons learned, though perhaps also a false sense of confidence based on an understanding of platforms that is more imagined than real. A young woman who had been treated for self-harm and suicidal ideation told us her For You page was filled with harmful content and how she tried to understand the TikTok algorithm to escape it:

> First, I try to avoid it. Then, I use more time on other topics and there will be more of this and less of the other … I just realised that I could not continue the way I used to. All of my 'For You' page was filled with that sort of thing. (F, 18, NO, #11)

It took a combination of self-knowledge and algorithm literacy to prioritise viewing happier content, knowing that this, too, would be amplified by the platform:

> You need to be conscious of what content makes you better or worse … I have figured out how I can avoid seeing … or see more of what I want to see and that I know will make me feel better.

One might wonder why she stayed on social media; she echoed the views of many young people in explaining that searching for #mental health on TikTok provided other people's descriptions of difficulties, which she found relatable and validating: 'It was not only me,' 'Yes, this is like it is,' 'They put into words the things I cannot describe'. Although she felt such content was not always good for her, reading about other people's difficulties was tempting, perhaps helping her process her own. In this way, engagement in self-harm content online can be understood as a relational and personal exploration and may cover a need to belong, to express and share problems, and for support (Stänicke, 2022; Stänicke et al., 2025). She also described relapses in which she was again tempted to read about suicide content, though she believed she was getting quicker at escaping it on successive occasions. She reflected on how important it is to be conscious of what happens to you on social media and that it is your responsibility to filter the content you see and scroll past anything problematic.

Such knowledge can be elusive: a 17-year-old girl with depression who engaged in online self-harm activities explained that 'You can either push "don't show this video again" or in another way report the content. I then see less negative content' (F, 17, NO, #6). Later, she told us that triggering content 'just appears' without warning and that only with hindsight did she realise it was prompted by the content she was seeking. Such advice remains difficult to put into practice, partly because online

communities for people with the same mental health difficulties tend to 'drag each other further down.'

Coping and resilience involve reflexive deliberation about one's digital knowledge, experiences and practices (Vandoninck et al., 2012; Vissenberg et al., 2022). In the interviews, we heard how, for vulnerable youth, this can require potentially painful reflection on one's biography as well as supportive peer discussion and shared experimentation online, hand in hand with developing a critical understanding of social media platforms and their algorithms. This co-development of self-knowledge (Stänicke et al., 2025) and platform knowledge enables young people to make complex social media decisions. A key instance is determining which sources or people are trustworthy – this is particularly crucial in obtaining social support, advice and help online. However, trust markers are generally lacking in the digital environment (Easton et al., 2018), which instead prioritises anonymity, identity play and even deception (boyd, 2011). The young people told us of multiple socio-digital strategies for determining trust in circumstances where poor decisions can have serious consequences.

For example, we earlier quoted a 19-year-old woman who had been groomed online and sexually abused in her early teens (F, 19, NO, #27). She was keen to explain how to identify the signs of potential groomers, relying on both her trusted contacts and the technological features on Snapchat– she checked each contact's Snap score (to see if they were a new user) and preferred those who 'searched' for her by name ('I feel "okay, they have sought me out … it seems like they might want to get in touch with me; maybe they want to tell me something"') from those for whom her profile was suggested to others as a 'quick add' by the software (since they did not even know her name). In another case quoted earlier, a 17-year-old who has suffered multiple mental health difficulties since being groomed at the age of 10 explained that:

> When you're on Xbox, you don't really see someone. You hear their voice, and you can almost always tell if someone is young because they've not hit puberty and you can hear it in their voice. And I guess that's what those people go for' (F, 17, UK, #5).

Developing her insights, she uses social and digital skills to discern the signs of grooming, such as when she finds herself manipulated and intentionally isolated from her peers on social media platforms. Such 'signs to look out for' also apply in face-to-face situations. In addition to forensically interpreting user actions, she can now decode specific platform features:

> What I look for is, if it's an account that's messaged me, when have they started the account? So, if they've started it recently, that's a sign that it's a fake account. If it's got loads of followers on it where it's just a load of bots, then you know it's a fake account … If you ask them to send a photo of them now on video chat and they don't, then that's a huge sign that they are a catfish or someone not nice.

Indeed, there are grounds to think young people are learning to distrust not only those on the platforms but the platforms themselves for promoting problematic content:

> In the last six months, [TikTok has] gone from being very, very positive to being very, very toxic. And that's because the way that influencers are influencing things like weight loss and diet pills and stuff like that … they portray it as if it's a good thing, but in reality, … there's 10-year-olds saying they're fat. (F, 18, UK, #6)

Relying on yourself as a coping strategy has merits in a climate of deception and distrust, where your problems may be trivialised or exploited. An important aspect of platform literacy is learning the importance of distrust. However, society should not be satisfied with holding young people responsible in such ways.

Discussion and conclusions

Social media companies typically refer to their users in generalised terms – as adult, resilient and fully independent (5Rights, 2021; Lenhart & Owens, 2021). Our present focus has been to research the digital experiences and emerging digital literacy of young people with mental health difficulties and to contribute to efforts to bring their voices into debates over better digital education or platform regulation (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Lenhart & Owens, 2021; O'Neill & Dopona, 2024). While acknowledging that vulnerability takes many forms and fluctuates over time, we have found that vulnerable youth can be creative, knowledgeable and skilled about social media platforms, resulting in platform literacy. Platform literacy requires a detailed analysis of the particular features and operation of social media platforms, even though – or precisely because – these are subject to continual change. We have shown how, sometimes in dialogue with their peers, young people invest considerable effort in critically examining and comparing details of the social media platforms for their risky, trustworthy, privacy or safety features. Seeking ways to manage or cope with extreme or triggering experiences also leads them to speculate about the algorithms that connect what is visible on the screen with the platform architecture and attention economy that lies behind and beyond it. Young people's resulting platform literacy may go deeper than is commonly supposed when young people are taught functional skills or e-safety awareness. But it may be limited insofar as it may be specific to particular platforms or contexts, and it requires constant updating, itself effortful, given the ever-changing and largely opaque design of digital platforms (Burrell, 2016). It may even be counter-productive if the young people imagine affordances or exchange myths about algorithms that misunderstand platform operation.

Possibly, awareness of their own vulnerabilities motivates young people with mental health difficulties to make strenuous efforts to understand and protect themselves from risky digital affordances on social media platforms that commercialise the mainstreaming, promotion and personalised targeting of extreme content. We found that young people can be reflexive about how their digital experiences relate to their biographies, including acknowledging their past problems and continued vulnerabilities. By turning a critical lens not only on social media platforms but also on themselves, young people were finding ways to optimise their agency and develop resilience for future digital engagement. As Currie and Kelly (2022) show, user reflexivity mobilises young people as active producers of meaning. It thereby promotes crucial dimensions of digital literacy – analytic, ethical, and political – that are not typically taught at school. The findings also showed how young people learn not only through individual motivation but also as part of a dynamic and deliberative culture of experimentation, adaptation, resistance or struggle to coexist with complex algorithmic architectures and business models (Perrotta & Pangrazio, 2023). However, as discussed in the introduction, the concept of affordance entails that the same object can be used in different ways: hence, the process of perceiving affordances through sharing digital experiences with others can be complicated (Bucher, 2017).

Nonetheless, they struggle when facing a range of risky platform affordances. This results in extreme experiences that are further intensified by processes promoting widespread content sharing and the personalisation of content feeds that target individual vulnerabilities. When their efforts to manage the risky affordances of social media platforms failed, the young people tended to blame themselves. Adding to the complexity of identifying digital affordances are specific developmental factors, such as wishing to fit in with others or acting impulsively (Orben et al., 2024). Possibly for these reasons, few of the young people we interviewed could seriously envisage withdrawing from social media; notwithstanding its challenges, they greatly valued the opportunities for sociability, recognition, community and support. Instead, we witnessed them adopting a hypervigilant approach – a new normal of being constantly wary in the struggle to predict the unpredictable and control the uncontrollable. None of this is to criticise young people or play into moral and media panics premised on young people's vulnerability (Staksrud, 2013). Instead, we argue that platform literacy, though crucial, must be complemented by the responsibilities of society to regulate and design the platforms that host and shape young people's digital lives (5Rights, 2021; O'Neill & Dopona, 2024; Staksrud, 2013). Further, such responsibilities should consider the distinctive needs and circumstances of vulnerable youth, as well as respecting and guiding them rather than blaming them for their efforts to seek their own solutions.

When asked for policy and practice recommendations, young people call for better regulation of platforms, especially the regulation of the algorithms that promote extreme and harmful content (see also Livingstone & Stoilova, 2023). They also want greater just-in-time specialist support and non-judgmental forms of adult engagement and education, including opportunities for them to learn, make mistakes and care for themselves. Such critical insights should be used to inform policies regarding the continued updating of digital literacy education to reflect platform operation and business models and to respect young people's reflexivity regarding their strengths and weaknesses. Essential for those with mental health difficulties is the availability of updated awareness training for clinicians and youth workers to address the young people's engagement with platforms. Our research indicates that digital literacy, and platform literacy need to be embedded in clinical and professional training, if professionals are to effectively engage with the digital lived experience of those they support. Continuing professional development or mandatory training must also include platform literacy updates. This should be in tandem with regulation to mandate safety-by-design for social media in ways that limit their commercially motivated amplification of risky-by-design platforms, thus reducing the burden on both young people and those who support them. While we are currently witnessing young people's experiences of an individual-responsibility model of literacy development (Livingstone et al., 2022), the focus on platform literacy revealed the need for a strong critique of platform architectures and affordances and, in response, systematic regulatory approaches to curb the risky designs which exploit youth vulnerabilities.

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Notes on contributors

Sonia Livingstone OBE is a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published 21 books on media audiences, children and young people's risks and opportunities, media literacy and rights in the digital environment, including 'Parenting for a Digital Future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives'. Since founding the EC-funded 'EU Kids Online' research network, and Global Kids Online (with UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti), she has advised the Council of Europe, European Commission, European Parliament, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, OECD, ITU and UNICEF. She is currently leading the Digital Futures for Children centre at LSE with the 5Rights Foundation.

Reidar S Jessen (PhD., University of Oslo) is a clinical psychologist and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Oslo, Department of Psychology. The overarching question guiding his research is the development of self and identity, and he works at the intersection of psychology, feminist and queer studies. Jessen is currently conducting qualitative interviews with transgender youth in Norway about their subjective experiences of gender. He is also involved in ySKILLS (Youth Skills), an interdisciplinary research collaboration between LSE and the University of Oslo that explores the impact of the digital environment on children and young people. Jessen's postdoctoral fellowship is financed by the interdisciplinary research project Living the Nordic Model and UiO:Norden.

Mariya Stoilova is a Post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Her area of expertise is at the intersection of child rights and digital technology with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media use in the everyday lives of children and young people, data and privacy online, digital skills, and pathways to harm and well-being.

Line Indrevoll Stänicke, Psych. Ph D, is an Associate Professor and a Clinical Psychologist at the University of Oslo, Department of Psychology and a senior researcher at the Lovisenberg Hospital in Oslo, Norway. Her research interests are developmental psychology, adolescence, risk behaviour such as self-harm and digital risk engagement, and clinical processes in psychotherapy.

Dr Richard Graham is a Consultant Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, and Clinical Director at stem4: the Young People's Mental Health Charity. He was formerly a Clinical Director at the Tavistock Clinic and for the past 5 years he was the Clinical Director for Good Thinking: London's Digital Mental Well-being Service. He has worked extensively in digital health and e-safety for the last 12 years and is recognised as a digital health pioneer. He also established the first Technology Addiction Service for Young People in the UK in 2010 and contributed to the World Health Organisations consideration of Gaming Disorder as a medical diagnosis.

Elisabeth Staksrud, PhD, is a professor at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, Norway, and chair of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) Children, Youth and Media Section. Her research interests evolve around children and online risk, regulation and rights, online censorship and governance and research ethics. She is in the management group of the EU Kids Online project and partner in the CO:RE and ySKILLS H2020 funded projects.

Prof Tine K. Jensen, Psych. PhD, is a professor and a clinical psychologist at the University of Oslo, Department of Psychology and a senior researcher at the Norwegian Centre on Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies in Oslo. Her research interests focus on understanding the consequences of traumatic experiences and the impact they have on youth and their families, and on change processes in psychotherapy. She has been involved in several studies including trauma treatment studies, refugee studies and studies on mental health outcomes after catastrophes such at the terror attack on Utøya Island. She is a member of the ISTSS guidelines committee for early intervention and treatment of PTSD. After the terror attack in Norway, she has been part of the Norwegian Health Directorates advisory group for psychosocial interventions after catastrophes.

ORCID

Sonia Livingstone http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3248-9862
Reidar Schei Jessen http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3635-2238
Mariya Stoilova http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9601-7146
Line Indrevoll Stänicke http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7522-8307
Richard Graham http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4889-9575
Elisabeth Staksrud http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9829-4817
Tine Jensen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0751-0228

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