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RESEARCH

There is no Point in Telling: Disclosing Negative Online Experiences Among Youth with Mental Health Challenges

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Abstract

Online victimization has been linked to mental health problems. Youth often do not disclose these experiences, and little is known about disclosure barriers, particularly among youth with mental health challenges. This study aimed to fill this gap by identifying barriers to and facilitators of disclosure for this vulnerable group. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 45 young people aged 13–22 from the UK and Norway who had mental health challenges and experiences with cyberbullying, sexual abuse online, and/or exposure to harmful content online. We asked the youth open-ended questions about digital activity and negative online experiences, whether they had disclosed such experiences, and what helped or stopped them from disclosing. The responses were analyzed using Reflective Thematic Analysis. Previous negative life experiences leading to lack of trust, being afraid of the consequences, and avoiding difficult feelings were described as barriers while disclosure was facilitated when they were asked directly about their online activities. Given the growing evidence for the association between mental health challenges and risky digital activities, more knowledge on disclosure barriers is needed. Since young people find it difficult to initiate conversations regarding events that they feel shameful for and fear negative consequences of disclosure, adults must actively inquire into online activities in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. Youth with mental health challenges may have had negative experiences in the past that caused them to lose trust. As a result, it is important to rebuild their trust. Disclosure is encouraged by asking direct questions about online activity.

Keywords Mental health · Online child sexual abuse · Cyberbullying · Harmful content · Vulnerability · Online victimization · Childhood trauma

Introduction

Youths' digital engagement is deeply embedded in their daily lives. They use social media platforms and the internet to learn, establish new friendships, gain social support, and find entertainment (Davidson et al., 2022; Smahel et al., 2020; Stoilova et al., 2020). However, this engagement may expose them to cyberbullying and sexual exploitation, as well as to sites promoting self-harm, suicidal behavior, and eating disorders (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021; Salza

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& Samuel, 2025; Smahel et al., 2020). As with other types of adversity, online victimization has been linked to serious mental health and behavioral problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, delinquency, substance abuse, difficulties at school, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Baldry et al., 2019; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Holfeld & Mishna, 2021; Joleby et al., 2021; Jonsson et al., 2019; Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2022; McHugh et al., 2018; Memon et al., 2018; Perret et al., 2020; Susi et al., 2023). Although online victimization may be harmful, many youth do not disclose their experience to anyone, including teachers and other professionals (Katz et al., 2021; Livingstone et al., 2011; Priebe et al., 2013; Smahel et al., 2020), and adults often fail to recognize or address the online risks these young people encounter (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). The reasons for and barriers to the disclosure of online risks are limitedly understood. This gap is especially pronounced among youth with mental health challenges, which is the target group of this paper. More knowledge on disclosure barriers is important since disclosing victimization may be a first step to ensure future safety, access support and start the process of healing.

Many online activities may expose youth to exploitation, such as image-based sexual abuse, non-consensual sexting, sexual extortion, and online solicitation. The use of the term child sexual abuse online (CSAO) is recommended and "refers both to the sexual abuse of children that is facilitated by technology (e.g. online grooming) and to sexual abuse of children that is committed elsewhere and then repeated by sharing it online through, for instance, images and videos" (See Greijer & Doek, 2025 pp. 83–84). The consequences of CSAO may intensify when photos and videos are distributed online due to the permanence and accessibility of images, leaving victims in a constant state of fear and vulnerability (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020; Jonsson et al., 2019; Stänicke et al., 2024).

Cyberbullying involves harassment of an individual via the internet by posting threats and spreading rumors on social media or through other forms of electronic communication, such as email and text messages (Ansary, 2020; Brandtzæg et al., 2009; Englander et al., 2017). Although online and face-to-face bullying have similarities and often affect the same victims (Barbovschi & Staksrud, 2021), online bullying is distinguished by a lack of boundaries, indicating that young victims can be exposed at any time or place, limiting the places where victims can feel safe (Mishna et al., 2009). Additionally, online bullying can be visible to a wide population, possibly adding to feelings of shame (Perret et al., 2020).

Risky or harmful content online has few clear boundaries and is difficult to define. A broad definition includes sites where a child is exposed to inappropriate content such as sexual, pornographic and violent images; racist, discriminatory or hate speech material; and websites advocating unhealthy or dangerous behaviours, such as self-harm, suicide and anorexia (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). Although online communities can be supportive, some content can be triggering and even increase harmful behaviors (Marchant et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2014; Staksrud et al., 2013; Stänicke, 2023; Susi et al., 2023).

The extensive research on disclosing offline victimization can help to understand the disclosure barriers to online victimization. Common barriers to disclosure of child sexual abuse include experiencing a lack of support and understanding, perceived negative consequences for self and others, feelings of self-blame, shame and guilt, not wanting to burden caregivers, and fear of not being believed (Alaggia et al., 2019; Landberg et al., 2022; Lemaigre et al., 2017; McElvaney, 2015; McGuire & London, 2020; Ullman et al., 2020). The literature on disclosing bullying supports many of the research findings on child sexual abuse, such as fear of the consequences and caregiver reactions (Blomqvist et al., 2020; Boulton et al., 2017). Barriers rarely mentioned in the field of child sexual abuse are peer disapproval and pride thereby preferring autonomy and solving their problems independently (Boulton et al., 2017; de Lara, 2012).

Despite the limited research on online disclosure barriers, some of the findings are similar to those found in the offline disclosure literature, particularly pertaining to the fear of consequences and the perception that disclosing victimization will not help (Betts et al., 2022; Daneback et al., 2018; Dennehy et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2009; Priebe et al., 2013). Fearing the loss of internet privileges is mentioned in some studies (Mishna et al., 2009), but not in others (Priebe et al., 2013). As with bullying, studies on cyber victimization demonstrated that youth prefer to manage the situation independently and do not want to appear weak in the eyes of their peers (Betts et al., 2022; Daneback et al., 2018; Dennehy et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, no study has reported on disclosure barriers for harmful online content.

The literature lacks a broad theoretical understanding of why disclosing negative online experiences is difficult. Newman (2008) used theories of coping and self-regulation to understand help seeking in bullied youth, and this framework may be applicable to online victimization as well. Newman posited that youth engage in a complex decision-making process about how to cope with victimization and whether seeking help is in their overall best interest.

Disclosing negative experiences may be understood as an adaptive coping strategy for dealing with online stressors and comprises a series of dilemmas that the youth must consider when deciding to disclose. Newman introduced three decision-making criteria for disclosure: *necessity, target,* and *content*. Necessity is related to assessments of seriousness and agency: "Am I in danger?", "Can I solve this on my own?". Target refers to reflections concerning whom to confide in and will it help: "Who can help me?", "Will they understand?", "Will it make me feel better?". Content refers to what to tell: "Should I tell them everything-even the most distressing things?" and "What will the consequences be?" In this paper, we draw on Newman's framework when we discuss barriers to disclosing online victimization, situating these barriers within the broader literature on disclosure.

Most studies on disclosure are retrospective where adults are asked to recall childhood experiences and thus may have limited validity due to recall bias (Susi et al., 2023). Additionally, many studies include youth who have not had negative online experiences for instance by using focus groups (Mishna et al., 2009). Therefore, much of the data is not based on personal experiences. Furthermore, despite the associations between mental health challenges and negative online experiences, no study has specifically targeted online disclosure experiences of youth with mental health challenges. Understanding disclosure practices among youth with mental health challenges is crucial both because their experiences may uniquely shape how they choose to disclose, and because adults and clinicians play a particularly important role in supporting their disclosure processes, as these youth may be especially vulnerable to revictimization stemming from negative online experiences. Finally, many studies are quantitative in nature, and although this form of research yields important insights, more in-depth data remains to be sought from youth with personal experiences and from their own perspectives.

This study filled these gaps by analyzing interviews conducted with youth with mental health challenges that have had negative online experiences. We use the term mental health challenges broadly, signifying youth that have been referred to or received help from child and adolescent metal health services for different reasons. All participants had experience with CSAO, cyberbullying, and/or had been exposed to or engaged in harmful content online (e.g., self-harm content online). This study aimed to determine why they did not disclose their experiences, and what may facilitate disclosure. Based on the literature on offline victimization we had pre-assumptions that negative expectations related to the consequences of disclosure for themselves and their family, feelings of self-blame and shame, and fear of disbelief would be described as major disclosure barriers and that conversations about online activities would facilitate disclosure.

Method

We interviewed youth with mental health challenges about their online experiences. We explored online at-risk behaviors and negative experiences, as well as reasons for not disclosing such experiences (see Livingstone et al., 2022 for details of the study).

Participants

We interviewed a total of 62 participants aged 16–21. Of these, 45 discussed their negative online experiences and disclosures. The final sample thus comprised 45 participants aged 13–22 years (40 females and 5 males). The mean age of females in both samples was 17 years (range 13–20 in the Norwegian sample and 14–22 in the UK sample). For males, the mean age in both samples was 16 years (range 13–19 in the Norwegian sample and 15–17 in the UK sample). Many of the participants had multiple negative experiences both online and offline. Although formal diagnoses were not collected, many of the participants self-reported comorbid diagnoses of PTSD, depression, ADHD, anxiety, eating disorders, as well as self-harming behaviors. Social economic status was not collected from the participants. See Table 1 for sample characteristics.

Procedure

A convenience sample was recruited from child and adolescent mental health clinics, private practices, hospitals, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that organize youth with adverse life experiences and mental health challenges. In Norway 75 clinic leaders and 6 clinical psychologists working in private practice or community services were asked to distribute information leaflets to therapists and eligible adolescents in their clinic. Therapists in each clinic recruited adolescents between the ages of 13 and 20 years with previous negative online experiences with sexual abuse, cyberbullying, and/or exposure to harmful

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Characteristic	Total sample ($N=45$)	Norway ($n=30$)	UK ($n=15$)
Gender, *n*			
Female	40	27	13
Male	5	3	2
Ethnic minority, *n*	12	3	9
Online experiences, *n*			
Child sexual abuse online	21	16	5
Cyberbullying	14	8	6
Harmful online content	26	16	10

content online. A non-governmental organization (NGO) that organizes adolescents with adverse life experiences and mental health problems was also approached. A total of 14 participants were recruited through this organization. Finally, 1 participant was recruited from a reference group of young patients at a local hospital. In the UK recruitment was conducted through a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in a southern city supporting youth and a northern city NGO that organizes a youth mental health-related apprenticeship scheme. Information leaflets about the project were distributed by the gatekeepers, either by contacting the youth directly or via mailing lists and social media channels.

All youth in the sample were signposted due to probable mental health conditions by the NGO and/or their therapists. All had experience with mental health services either previously or currently. Interested participants were contacted by the research team (the authors) and offered a choice of a face-to-face or online interview. Most of the participants preferred face-to-face interviews. Consent was obtained via a consent form (either electronic or hard copy) or verbally during the interviews. For participants under 16 years of age, consent was obtained from their legal guardians. Seventeen participants recruited through the North England partner organization received a £30 voucher compensating for their time via the recruiting organization, with the form and distribution of compensation determined at the organization's discretion. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted by the authors (TKJ, LIS, MS, RSJ, RG, SL). Collection of sensitive and personal data was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, (Ref. 705571), and the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (Ref. 23512/30.07.2021). In both countries, the participants' well-being during the interview was carefully monitored. At the end of the interview, we asked the participants about their engagement in the interviews, which provided them with an opportunity to discuss possible adverse effects. All participants were offered professional follow-up mental health support if needed. Following this procedure, no interviews were terminated, and no participant required further counselling or referrals following the interviews.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was jointly developed by the authors, all of whom have expertise in media and/or psychology/psychiatry. The interview questions were open ended and comprised four main parts. First, questions designed to map the digital platforms the participants used and how this related to their mental health were posed. Second, we asked participants to describe a particularly challenging situation online to further explore how they are affected by internet use and how they handle challenging situations. Third, the participants' accounts of their digital skills were explored; Finally, we asked whether they sought advice from others when facing challenging situations online and what advice they would give to their peers, parents, caregivers, therapists, and tech companies to minimize online victimization risks. We also explored whether they had discussed their negative online experiences with other people, who those people were, how they faced such experiences, why they delayed disclosing to anyone (if they did), and whether they thought other adults in their lives understood their digital activities and their experiences online.

We asked open-ended questions that would elicit narratives about their thoughts and experiences. The interviews were flexibly conducted to follow the flow of the participants' ideas and experiences while ensuring that the main questions were asked, and to pursue certain areas in greater depth as they emerged in the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and transferred to NVivo. The Norwegian interviews were translated to English. The interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), as this was suitable for exploring youths' experiences and thoughts about disclosure. Thematic analysis is an inductive approach that allows data to inform the themes. This paper is based on analysis of data from the interviews describing disclosure practices.

The steps in thematic analysis were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2022):

Familiarizing with the dataset: All authors read and re-read all interviews first in their native language, taking notes about ideas relating to the entire dataset. The team had several meetings to discuss initial impressions. For this paper, we then divided into a primary analytic team (first and second authors) and auditor (third author) to review consensus judgements, ensuring that the analysis was plausible and understandable and that important themes were not overlooked.

Coding: All data from the interviews related to disclosure were copied into NVivo. The first and second author independently identified data segments, paying particular attention to emerging patterns and generated initial codes. Chunks of data associated with these initial codes were then sorted into NVivo to help maintain an overview of the developing analysis.

Generating initial themes: We then met several times to discuss codes and started combining codes into potential themes and subthemes that depict the data, cross-checking how the themes support the data. The third author was consulted several times during this process to ensure that the themes captured the data and that possible themes were not overlooked.

Developing and reviewing themes: We refined and defined each theme and identified which aspects of data were being captured. All interviews were reanalyzed to ensure consistency across the nuanced variations in the data. We discussed the meaning of the topics in relation to the off-line disclosure literature and how they aligned with our pre-assumptions.

Refining, defining and naming themes: In this phase the analysis and themes were shared with all authors to ensure that the themes were plausible and captured the meanings in the interviews. When discussing the analysis and as we started to write up the paper we reflected on Newman (2008), who used theories of coping and self-regulation to understand help seeking among bullied youths and applied this framework to the discussion of possible online victimization.

Reflexivity To enhance the reliability of the analysis, the authors engaged in self-reflection and documented the analytic process (methodological integrity checks; Levitt et al., 2017). The teams included researchers with disciplinary backgrounds in media studies, psychology, psychiatry, and sociology, as well as diverse expertise in areas such as policy and regulations, digital skills, children's rights, development, trauma, and marginalization. This ensured that the data were discussed, interpreted, and analyzed from multiple perspectives (researcher triangulation; Flick, 2014).

Results

The youth in this study discussed serious negative online experiences and exposure to harmful sites, causing emotional pain, social isolation, and negative self-worth. A majority of the participants had multiple experiences, and online and offline negative experiences were often intertwined. Many were groomed into sexual activities by adults who appeared to be younger, complimented them, and gave them emotional support. Some of the sexual activities started out seemingly harmless but escalated to more serious offenses, ending with coercion to partake in increasingly extreme sexual activities and threats to expose them if they did not comply. Cyberbullying was often an extension of face-to-face bullying, limiting the places where they could feel safe. The youth who recounted their exposure to harmful online sites described how they came across websites with extreme content, such as a young child crying, expressing her desire to die while holding a knife in her hand, videos of people engaging in self-harm, or videos of committing suicide online.

Disclosure Barriers

Negative Early Experiences Most of the disclosure barriers identified were fundamentally *relational,* describing a lack of trust in others and often rooted in negative previous experiences. Some described a lack of trust in adults who had previously failed to help them. Others responded that adults failed to understand their digital engagement. Many described that they did not think anyone could help either way. Interestingly, only one participant discussed fear of not being believed in, which has been described as a major disclosure barrier for offline sexual abuse. It may be that digital victimization often either has other witnesses as with cyberbullying or leaves digital traces such as sexual pictures that are distributed, making victimization easier to "prove."

Afraid of Negative Consequences The youth also described being wary of the *consequences* of disclosure for themselves and others. They did not want to burden their parents as they knew that their engagement in such activities would cause negative reactions. A few answered being afraid that their parents would overreact by punishing them or taking away their online privileges. Some were also afraid of the threats made by the perpetrator regarding what would happen if they disclosed the experience to anyone. Threats were directed either at the victim ("I will tell your parents") or the perpetrator ("I will kill myself").

Avoiding Difficult Feelings Finally, the youth mentioned the number of difficult and ambivalent *feelings* related to their online engagement that acted as barriers to discussing and disclosing harmful experiences. They described feeling ashamed of what they had participated in, and many mentioned that they had been warned about online risks, leaving them feeling more ashamed and guilty. Some were traumatized and felt that talking would cause negative feelings of reexperiencing the trauma.

Disclosure Facilitators

Someone has to Ask When describing facilitators of disclosure, the youth described how difficult it was to initiate a conversation about something that instigates negative feelings and feared consequences. They mentioned that

disclosure was often prompted when someone asked about their online activities.

An overview of the results is presented in Table 2 along with illustrative quotes.

Discussion

Our study indicates that youth with mental health challenges calibrate the risks and consequences of disclosure, supporting Newman's model and the relevance of his concepts: necessity, target and content.

Reflecting on the Need to Disclose

In our sample, youth reflected on whether disclosure was necessary. When disclosure is used as a coping strategy, it is typically expected to lead to positive, not punitive, outcomes. The way youth make sense of stressful experiences is subjective and idiosyncratic, and their cognitive and emotional interpretations feed directly into their assessment of necessity. All youth reported that their experiences of CSAO and cyberbullying were negative and harmful, and that disclosing to adults (parents, teachers, or therapists) was ultimately necessary to stop the harm and receive help. However, a small group of youth who engaged with harmful content online expressed mixed feelings. Although many recognized negative consequences, many also mentioned wanting to continue their online activities. For them, such online engagement seemed to provide social support and a space to share and explore difficult self-experiences, leading some to feel that there is nothing to disclose. As such disclosure is seen as unnecessary (see also Stänicke, 2023).

Reflecting on Whether Disclosing will Help

The most prevalent reason for not disclosing victimization and harmful online content was a lack of trust in adults and a sense that adults would not understand (*target*). The youth described how their lives were embedded in online activities that adults are unfamiliar with and therefore fail to grasp the significance of. Some feared that adults would overreact and remove their online privileges, again highlighting their belief that adults do not understand their online worlds. Many also had previous negative experiences, leaving them to believe that no one could help. These results show that disclosing personal and distressing experiences is a relational encounter shaped by previous relational experiences. The fact that so many young people felt—and had experienced—that adults were unreliable is alarming. This may be particularly true for youth in mental services who often have multiple reasons for seeking help. Consequently, young people may lose faith in the adults they rely on to help interpret their experiences, sort their emotions, and ultimately receive help.

Reflecting on what to Tell and the Emotional Cost of Disclosure

Our analysis also shows that youth may be reluctant to disclose negative online experiences due to self- and other protection. The youth were wary of caregivers' reactions and were sensitive to their feelings if they were to disclose their experiences (*content*). They did not want to upset their caregivers who were often already burdened. Many youth who experienced sexual offences expressed fear that the offender would harm either themselves or the youth if the content of their stories were revealed. Others were victimized by people who concealed their true identity, were part of a larger perpetrator networks, and had victimized multiple young people, which may explain why many feared retaliation if they disclosed. Disclosures also incur emotional costs. As youth attempt to disclose the content of their experiences, they may become overwhelmed by emotions such as shame, guilt, and re-experiencing, leading to increased stress and vulnerability. These feelings may deter further disclosures. These findings align with earlier research on offline victimization showing that it is often difficult and emotionally distressing for young people to reveal experiences that are shameful, secret, confusing, or distressing (Boulton et al., 2017; Jensen et al., 2005; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Stige et al., 2022). The youth described how difficult it is to initiate such conversations and emphasized that disclosure is facilitated when the topic is raised by others first. Very few youths reported that any had asked them directly about their negative online experiences. Although many had been in therapy, most had never been explicitly asked about their online activities by professionals. Considering the feared consequences, initiating such conversations may be difficult. Therefore, the youths chose to disclose for the first time when asked. This coincides with findings from offline disclosure research, where disclosure is facilitated if an adult asks first, when the victims feel that there is a purpose in disclosing, and when they expect positive outcomes (Bjereld et al., 2024; Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Jensen et al., 2005; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2019).

In sum, our analysis shows that youth seem to make many of the same calibrated decisions regarding whether to disclose negative online experiences as they do for offline victimization Disclosure practices seem thus not to be event specific. Youth consider the dilemmas they face and how best to manage the different costs. Applying Newmans concepts, they consider whether disclosure

Table 2 Themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotes

Overarching themes	Subthemes (number of cases)	Illustrative quotes (gender; age; experience; mental health problem[a])
Disclosure barriers		
Negative earlier experiences This theme covers barriers that are relational. Most of the youth in this sample referred to relational issues when explaining why they chose not to disclose victimization Many talked about past negative experiences with other people leading to lack of trust and a few explained that there is nothing be done, and that help is not possible Many described that adults do not understand how social media is part of their everyday lives, and they felt they would not be understood Only one talked about not being believed in as a disclosure barrier (46 respondents)	**No one to trust** (17 respondents)	I told my teacher about being bullied when I was in elementary school, which led to more bullying. I told them about violence at home when I was in junior high school and then my stepdad beat me more. So, there is really no point in talking to others [about online bullying and unwanted sharing of sexual pictures] (male; 17; cyberbullying, online sexual abuse, unwanted sharing of pictures; ADHD) I did not really speak to them (parents) about anything about social media, or about my incident. I was just not feeling safe—not in the right mindset. Getting help after that was so difficult, especially with my friends, because all my friends knew him, and they put him on a pedestal. If I told anyone, they would take his side, so I just didn't really tell anyone (female; 18; unwanted picture sharing led to sexual abuse; unknown) I think I tried talking but there were so many adults who had disappointed me, so I didn't trust anyone, not even my teachers. My therapist didn't help me, and I couldn't talk to my parents so there really wasn't anyone I trusted (female; 20; harmful content online; depression)
	They cannot understand (19 respondents)	Going to your mother and telling her about it, "Mom, I get bullied, because I have such a high Snap score," it's not exactly easy. Because a mother wouldn't really understand, because when they were young, when adults were young, they did not have social media. They barely had phones …so why spend your time trying to explain it? (female; 18; cyberbullying; online sexual abuse; PTSD) At that time their (therapist) viewpoint was to just turn off your phone. It shouldn't affect you if you don't look at it… They didn't understand the extent that young people liked to use the internet and why it was good for them (female; 17; cyberbullying, sexual abuse, depression; in the autism spectrum)
	They cannot help anyway (9 respondents)	It took several years after it was over before I talked about it (cyberbullying). I kept it to myself because when I was bullied in school, everyone saw it, but nobody did anything. I sat in the classroom and cried, and my teacher just looked at me and ignored me… So, there was no point in telling. I knew nothing would happen. What were they to do? Call the bullies up and say don't do that? Or put us in a room and tell them to say they are sorry, and then they just turn around and keep on bullying? Because that was what happened. I know that. So, there is no point in telling anyone (female; 18; cyberbullying, harmful content online; depression, PTSD, self-harm) I tried telling those counsellors online, and they just do not know what they are talking about. There not helpful. They are very patronizing.…You just want someone to talk through things and rationalize, not for someone to sit there and be like, oh I feel so bad for you (female; 17; harmful content online; grooming online sexual abuse; self-harm, anxiety and depression)
Afraid of negative consequences This theme covers a range of consequences the youth imagined would happen if they told anyone of their online risky behaviors/ experiences The most predominate fear was for putting excessive burdens or upsetting parents. Many felt their parents had enough problems to deal with in their lives, and some felt they had already caused concern and thus did not want to add to the burden A few talked about being threatened to not talk and feared that something bad would happen to themselves or the perpetrator. A few also were afraid the adults would overreact by threatening the abuser, take away online privileges, punishing them, or reporting to authorities (28 respondents)	**I do not want to burden or upset my parents** (14 respondents)	There has been so much hassle with me growing up, so I didn't want to add one more thing to the list (male; online sexual abuse, cyberbullying; anxiety, depression) But my mom, because she is so busy and there is eight of us, I am a child of eight, so I would never want to worry my mom. Because she works long hours, she is a nurse. My stepdad, he has his own business, and stuff like that. They were always busy, and I never really wanted to mention anything (female; 18; cyberbullying; anxiety disorder, suicidal thoughts)
	Adults will overreact (7 respondents)	I did not want to tell my dad. I have heard he can be violent. I didn't want him to go around killing people (rapist). I am his little princess (female; 18; online sexual abuse; cyberbullying; PTSD) Ages after, I ended up telling my mom, but I know that she was understanding about it because I was out of the situation. But if I were to come to her and say "I really like this man who I've met online, he's 27 she would kick me out, she would be so annoyed (female; 18; sexual abuse; unknown) I didn't say anything (being on harmful sites) because I was afraid she would take it away from me. I was afraid she would get mad and say, "you can't do this.". I kinda knew it was not OK, but I was really afraid she would say I couldn't be on Instagram. I meet a lot of people there (suicide groups), also when I was sick (depressed). She never would have let me, had she known (female; 16; online sexual abuse, harmful content online; PTSD, self-harm)

Table 2 (continued)

Overarching themes	Subthemes (number of cases)	Illustrative quotes (gender; age; experience; mental health problem[a])
	Being threatened to silence (7 respondents)	I couldn't say anything because he threatened to take his own life. I finally told my friend after she told me the same thing had happened to her (female; 16; online sexual abuse; harmful content online; PTSD; self-harm) If you say no and that you will go to the police, they can start threatening you because you never know who you are messing with. It can be a teenager who fights all the time and takes drugs. They can know where you live and come and beat me up and hurt me (female; 18; online sexual abuse; PTSD)
Avoiding difficult feelings This theme describes the feelings the youth have related to what happened that deters them from talking about their experiences. Many knew that they were putting themselves at risk and were very shameful of this. Others felt that talking caused emotional turmoil and therefore did not talk to anyone. A few described trauma-related re-experiencing, making disclosure difficult (21 respondents)	**Feeling shame, guilt, and embarrassed** (12 respondents)	We had talked about it in school, so we do not get into these things (online sexual abuse). I kept thinking "how could I be so stupid." It is so embarrassing. I was so shameful. So, I didn't want to tell anyone before I told my friend after a long time (female; 17; online sexual abuse, bullying; PTSD) I knew it was wrong because my mom had told me all while growing up to not send pictures, whatever you do, do not send pictures. So, I knew that it was a bad idea (female; 18; online sexual abuse; unknown)
	Reexperiencing/ hard to talk about (9 respondents)	I chose to not tell anyone. Not my parents and not the police. It was so bad. It is so hard to talk about. When you start talking, that is when you understand how much it has affected you. I told my therapist now. And it was like – oh here is a lot of stuff I've kept inside for so long (male; 19; online sexual abuse, cyberbullying; anxiety, depression)
Disclosure facilitators		
Someone has to ask A few youths described how starting a conversation about being victimized is extremely difficult and shameful. They did not disclose because they were never asked. Conversely, they mentioned that being asked facilitated disclosure (10 respondents; 7 NOR; 3 UK)		My therapist didn't ask me before, coincidentally, there were a lot of newspaper headlines about this [harmful online content]. Had she asked me before, I wouldn't have lied to her, but I never would have brought it up, had she not asked. It is much easier if someone else brings it up (female; 17; online sexual abuse; harmful online content; PTSD, eating disorder, self-harm) There was this youth help team. I contacted them. My contact was so nice. I felt safe. She made me hot chocolate. She was really direct and asked me what was going on. She asked much more than others have. She dug deeper. Went to the root of things. Asked direct questions. Asked about all the details. Because if you don't have all the information, you can't really help (female; 18; online sexual abuse; PTSD) My therapist— – we haven't talked about it. If the theme had come up, I wouldn't have lied… but it is not a theme I would bring up myself (female; 17; online sexual abuse; harmful content online; PTSD, self-harm, eating disorder)

[a]Not all youth shared their mental health problems

is *necessary*, who they can talk to (*target*) and how disclosing the *content* of their experiences will make them feel. They calibrate the potential costs of disclosure, and their decisions on whether to disclose rely on whether disclosing will contribute to emotional relief, understanding, and help. What seems striking in this sample of vulnerable youth is the lack of trust based on own experiences of betrayal. Youth with mental health challenges may have had many early life experiences that have left them with shattered assumptions related to trust and self-worth. The relationship between early betrayal, online and offline victimization, and lack of disclosure should be further examined.

Strengths and Limitations

To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the personal experiences of disclosing negative and potentially harmful online experiences of youth with mental health challenges. We believe it is a strength that several types of negative experiences were explored showing that barriers to disclosure may not be event specific but more generic. The sample size was relatively large for a qualitative study. Another strength is that the interviews were conducted in two different countries, as this enhanced the applicability of the findings. However, these results should be interpreted considering some limitations. We did not obtain journal records of diagnoses but relied on the youths' personal reports. The UK sample was not systematically screened for negative online experiences of CSAO, bullying, or negative online content. Some participants may have had experiences that were not disclosed to the interviewer. In addition, there were very few males in the sample, limiting gender interpretations. We acknowledge that contextual differences may have influenced both experiences and interpretations, and future research could usefully explore these dimensions in greater depth to strengthen understanding of the transferability and contextual specificity of the findings.

Clinical Implications

When young people experience negative or harmful encounters online or offline that they do not disclose, it may have significant social, emotional, and interpersonal consequences. Our study reveals how difficult it may be for some youth to discuss such experiences. The crucial advice provided by the youth was to "just ask."

From a mental health perspective, talking about possible online victimization may start a recovery process. From a developmental perspective, disclosure is often an opportunity for caregivers to engage in developmentally supportive dialogues that can aid young people in understanding what happened, limiting self-blame, and possibly preventing revictimization. Our findings are in line with those of other studies on offline victimization, showing that disclosure becomes less difficult if young people perceive that there is an opportunity to talk and a purpose for speaking, and if others initiate the topic of victimization (Jensen et al., 2005; Lemaigre et al., 2017; Stige et al., 2022).

Clinicians may have uncertainties regarding how to address negative online experiences. This uncertainty and lack of clinical guidelines are reasons for not addressing negative online experiences (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Quayle et al., 2024). This is grave concern given that clinicians have the potential to discover, stop, and treat possible online victimization. All the youth in our study had experiences with mental health professionals, but most had not discussed their online experiences with their therapists. However, those who did mentioned that the conversations emerged because their therapist addressed their online experiences or screened for them. They described these conversations as helpful and positive (see also Indrevoll Stänicke et al., 2025). Screening for negative online experiences may help identify victimization and initiate the disclosure process.

Providing education about internet safety is often suggested as a preventive aid (See Finkelhor et al., 2021 for an overview). Although this may be plausible, more knowledge is needed on how to provide such information. Our study demonstrates how this may be related to increased feelings of shame and embarrassment, which reduces the chances of disclosure. This is in line with Priebe et al. (2013), who argue that youth who receive information may feel more responsible for—or guilty about—their experiences. Thus, reflecting on how information is conveyed and sharing common disclosure barriers, including feelings of guilt about knowing what is wrong and illegal, are crucial.

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All authors conceived and designed the study and interview guide.
TKJ, LIS, MS, RJ, RG, SL interviewed the youth
TKJ, LIS, MS, SL analyzed and coded the data
TKJ drafted the manuscript
All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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Data Availability Due to the sensitivity of the data and the General Data Protection Regulation, the data cannot be shared.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Collection of sensitive and personal data was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, (Ref. 705571) , and the Research Ethics Committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (Ref. 23512/30.07.2021).

Consent Consent was obtained verbally or through a consent form during the interview. For participants under 16 years of age, consent was obtained from their legal guardians.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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