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Line Indrevoll Stänicke, PhD, Reidar Schei Jessen, PhD, Elisabeth Staksrud, PhD, Mariya Stoilova, PhD, Richard Graham, MRCPsych, Sonia Livingstone, PhD, and Tine K. Jensen, PhD

ABSTRACT

Self-harm is increasing among young people. Research highlights how engagement with texts, pictures or videos sharing self-harm content online (SCO) may escalate self-harm. However, few studies have examined young people's experience with SCO in clinical samples. The present study aims to explore how young people who self-harm and are in treatment become and stay engaged with SCO. The data consists of in-depth interviews with 12 young females (15–19 years of age). The analysis follows the steps of *Reflexive thematic analysis*. Three meta-themes were identified: 1) "Engaging in self-harm content online – A way to get to know oneself," 2) "Negative consequences and self-reflection – What am I doing to myself?," and 3) "A need to take charge – I must take care of myself." Engagement in SCO is discussed as a peer arena to obtain self-knowledge, self-reflection and self-protection in a digital age. Engagement with SCO can trigger self-harm and increase mental health problems but may influence affect regulation and

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mentalization for young people. Therapists should therefore explore patients' engagement in digital risks like SCO to understand upsides and downsides of the activity, the difficulties in ending the engagement, and the interconnectedness between challenges in online and offline life.

Objective

Research reviews report an increase in mental health problems such as self-harm among young people (e.g. Farkas et al., 2023; Gillies et al., 2018). "Self-harm" refers to actively and directly inflicting injury on one's body (such as cutting or burning) and is associated with several mental disorders, suicide ideation, and risk of death (Witt et al., 2021). A meta-analysis indicates that self-harm is reported by approximately 16 percent of 12–18-year-olds in several countries (Farkas et al., 2023), and the numbers are higher for girls struggling with mental health problems (40–60 percent; Witt et al., 2021). Self-harm serves different psychological functions, including to express oneself, share complicated feelings, gain control, and relief (Stänicke et al., 2018). To better understand the high frequency of self-harm among young people, increased access to social media and engagement in digital risk such as self-harm content online (SCO) in pictures, texts, or videos (e.g. TikTok or Snapchat) has received attention (Brennan et al., 2022; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2024; Susi et al., 2023).

In Europe, the 2018 EU Kids Online survey in 19 countries showed that 20–35 percent of 12–18-year-olds report exposure to SCO and they seldom tell adults, friends, or helpers of digital risk experiences (Smahel et al., 2020). Reviews underline that *frequent* internet use and *repeated* searches for SCO are correlated with higher levels of social-psychological distress, unmet need for treatment, and thoughts of self-harm and suicide (Brennan et al., 2022; Susi et al., 2023). Existing reviews on SCO engagement highlight both negative consequences – such as normalization or escalation of self-harm, social comparison or competition, development of a self-harm identity – and protective effects – such as self-harm mitigation or reduction of self-harm, promotion of self-harm recovery, social support, and help-giving (Brennan et al., 2022; Marchant et al., 2017; Susi et al., 2023). Thus, SCO is a risk behavior for increased and prolonged self-harm but can promote protective factors.

Studies on SCO are primarily based on quantitative data from population surveys (Susi et al., 2023). Qualitative studies enhance knowledge from young people's perspective using open questions. Goodman (2013) discusses SCO engagement as a digital storytelling about the self. Gámez-Guadix et al. (2022) show how young people are motivated to engage in digital self-harm to express distress, seek relief, get attention, because it is funny, and because others do it. Further, researchers have highlighted how SCO engagement provides young people with a sense of a supportive community where gender issues, distress or recovery may be shared (Brown et al., 2020; Owens et al., 2015). Following these findings, a recent meta-synthesis highlights how young people experience SCO as belonging to a community with peers who self-harm and as a way to know oneself during adolescence (Stänicke et al., 2023).

Adolescence is a life period with psychological, cognitive, biological, and social challenges (Thapar et al., 2015). Young people are increasingly oriented toward peers for social exploration, self-esteem, information, and guidance in problem solving and affect regulation, both on and offline. Sharing good or bad self-experiences with peers during adolescence may enable understanding one's own and others' behavior as mental states ("mentalization"), a tolerance for overwhelming self-experiences, and a more coherent self-identity (Fonagy et al., 2019). Shankleman et al. (2021) argue that young people's use of social media appears related to key developmental processes of attachment, identity, attention, and emotional regulation. Thus, SCO engagement may be an extended peer arena for risk exploration together with peers (Stänicke, 2022), and provide a potential space for relatedness and exploration of self-experiences that is important for identity formation (Stänicke et al., 2023).

Quantitative and qualitative studies on SCO primarily include participants from non-clinical populations (Stänicke et al., 2023). Thus, nuances regarding how SCO engagement is related to mental health problems in clinical populations, and how sharing of SCO engagement in treatment is experienced by clients are less known. In one study of young people being in treatment for self-harm, the participants described how SCO engagement was increasing their mental health problems but could also serve different functions – to be understood, to share problems, to feel useful, or to get support (Stänicke, 2022). Importantly, the participants seldom told their therapist about SCO engagement. Efficient treatment models for self-harm highlight the importance of reducing risk behaviors and developing coping strategies for difficult feelings and interpersonal situations (Witt et al., 2021). Addressing digital risks is reported as challenging by therapists (Aref-Adib et al., 2020) but may have genuine therapeutic benefits to reduce risk behavior for self-harm and suicide *and* to understand the protective social effects of SCO (Idelji-Tehrani et al., 2023).

Thus, this qualitative study aims to explore pathways of encountering and staying engaged in SCO among young people who struggle with self-harm and mental health problems and are in treatment. Three overall questions guide the study: Firstly, from the participants' perspectives, what are their reasons for SCO engagement? Secondly, how is SCO engagement related to their mental health problems? Thirdly, have they tried to disengage from SCO and were there any obstacles? The findings are discussed according to development of self-understanding during adolescence, considering both theoretical implications as well as recommendations for clinicians and other helpers. By developing concepts of the SCO phenomena from the young people's perspective, the findings can complement context-independent results from quantitative studies.

Method

Study setting and research design

The interviews used in this study are part of a larger research project (ySKILLS) focusing on the development of digital skills and risks among young people, including in-depth interviews with 62 young people (12–22 years) conducted in Norway and the UK (see Livingstone et al., 2022).

Recruitment and sample

The sample consisted of 12 young women (15–19 years of age) who struggled with mental illness such as depression (n = 5), eating disorder (n = 4), PTSD (n = 2) or anxiety (n = 1). All participants were in treatment, engaged in SCO and most had also experience with other internet-related risks or trauma (e.g. cyberbullying, or sexual abuse online). These qualitative interviews were conducted in Norway between November 2021 and April 2022. Participants were recruited through children and adolescents' mental health outpatient services (n = 7), experts by experience (n = 3), a clinical psychologist in private practice (n = 1), and a community service (n = 1). They were selected as informative exemplars for a purposive and heterogenic sample (related to age, mental illness, socio-economic and cultural background) rather than a representative sample.

In-depth interviews

Three clinical psychologists and researchers (authors 1, 2 and 4) conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews (45–105 minutes) following a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. The interview guide was developed by the UK and Norwegian teams together, first in English, and then translated into Norwegian, and included four interview topics: 1) Digital engagement and mental health; 2) Experiences of digital risk; 3) Digital

skills; and 4) Whether they seek advice from others in difficult online situations. During the interview, the interviewer explored the young people's thoughts and feelings, and articulated her/his understanding (empathically and through questions), which allowed the informant to confirm, nuance or correct their experiences with a reflexive listener. In the present study, we analyze data from participants who struggled with mental illness, self-harmed *and* engaged in SCO.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2019) was chosen to investigate the qualitative data. The data analysis was led by a primary analytic team (author 1, 2 and 6), and the results were discussed with auditors (author 3, 4 and 5) to ensure a plausible and understandable analysis ("consensual qualitative research;" Hill et al., 2005). First, the audio recorded interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and transferred into NVivo. The researchers *familiarized themselves with the data* by reading and rereading the interviews. Second, the first author systematically *generated initial codes* for meaningful parts of the data close to the informants' descriptions. Thereafter, the codes were organized into "groups of codes" collected with rich quotes (see Table 1). Some codes were dismissed, grouped together, or split apart. The quotes from the Norwegian interviews were translated into English and attention was paid to capture the essence of the informants' quotes. Third, we *searched for themes* by identifying patterns across the groups of codes. Fourth, we generated a *hierarchy* of meta-themes, themes, and sub-themes, which represented the patterns and nuances in the participant's experiences. Fifth, meta-themes, themes, and sub-themes were *defined and named* in the most meaningful and informative way.

Credibility checks and reflexivity

During the data analysis, we sought trustworthiness and methodological integrity by keeping the analysis transparent and close to the participants' quotes (Stiles, 1993). Primarily, we used an inductive approach, focusing on the semantic content, and allowing the data to inform the themes. Still, reflexive thematic analysis highlights the researcher's contribution through an active and generative process. The authors represent different knowledge fields (clinical psychology, developmental psychology, and media and communication). We attempted to increase reflexivity by noting ideas and thoughts throughout the data analysis ("reflective noting") (Levitt et al., 2017). The researchers' background attuned us to developmental issues during adolescence – such as exploration of self and others through online activity.

The epistemological position of critical realism informed our analysis. We aimed to disclose reality, but at the same time, we acknowledge that researchers cannot have an unmediated take on reality (Willig, 2013). The results are not a "direct view" of the young people's SCO engagement but rather labeled and represented by the informants and further interpreted by us as a research team.

Table 1. Example levels of analysis.

Meta-theme	Theme	Sub-theme	Quote
1. "Engaging in self-harm content online – a way to get to know oneself"	1.1 Becoming part of a social group – someone understood my pain	*1.1.1 Read about SCO groups and wanted to be a member*	«I read about these groups in the newspaper . . . Maybe, it was the worst year of my life and I felt very lonely. It was kind of nice to find people to talk to . . . they shared not only about their struggles but about nice things as well."

Service user perspective

We did a pilot interview with an expert by first-hand experience of mental health problems, self-harm, and SCO engagement, which resulted in adjusted questions (e.g. more child friendly language). The person also contributed to discussing preliminary findings and commented on the manuscript for increasing the ecological validity of the study.

Privacy legislation, data management and ethics

The project is in accordance with the Norwegian National Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NESH, 2021). The data management plan was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (SIKT – Ref: 705571). Free and informed consent was obtained from all participants. They received written and verbal project information. For young people under 16 years of age, their caregivers signed the consent. The interview team included clinical psychologists to ensure support while talking about sensitive topics, and especially if risk was detected. None of the participants needed counseling or referrals to a clinic because of the interviews.

Results

The synthesis resulted in three meta-themes with associated themes and sub-themes: 1) "Engaging in self-harm content online – A way to get to know oneself," 2) "Negative consequences and self-reflection – What am I doing to myself?," and 3) "A need to take charge – I must take care of myself." Each meta-theme characterizes essential features of subjective reasons for becoming engaged in SCO, their experience of themselves and others in the engagement, and how their engagement changed over time. To increase transparency, the number of participants (n) which represent the themes are added in the overview of meta-themes, themes, and subthemes (see Table 2) (Hill et al., 2005). The results are illustrated with rich quotes from three cases – Lena, Marianne, and Ruby – to show how the themes are connected.

First meta-theme: "Engaging in self-harm content online – A way to get to know oneself"

The first meta-theme shows how engagement in SCO was part of an extensive online activity that provided different opportunities to explore difficult experiences in everyday life – to share a difficult life situation, to explore difficult self-experiences, or to get knowledge.

Becoming part of a social group – Someone understood my pain

Some of the participants highlighted how SCO engagement was a way to become part of a social group with young people who shared problems (1.1). For many years, Marianne experienced big conflicts between her parents. Her father had been violent toward her mother, and she lived in fear. At the end of elementary school, she and her mother moved to a new city, but she struggled to make friends. Marianne *read about SCO groups* (1.1.1) in a newspaper. She felt relief and validation when she became included: "Maybe, it was the worst year of my life and I felt very lonely. It was kind of nice to find people to talk to . . . they understood my pain . . . and they shared about nice things as well." For Marianne, SCO engagement provided an opportunity to talk about her problems but also positive experiences.

Even though she did not think her SCO engagement helped her to reduce her mental health problems, she became *motivated to keep searching for help* (1.1.2). She got tips on where to get help: "If you know that there is a person who has been hospitalized 100 times and tried to take her life 100 times, and you see that they are actually better off now, then it strengthens what they say." She thought her mother could not understand her SCO engagement and was afraid of negative consequences if her mother knew: "She could take my phone away."

Table 2. Overview of meta-themes, themes, and sub-themes.

Meta-themes	Themes	*Sub-themes*
First meta-theme: "Engaging in self-harm content online – a way to get to know oneself"	1.1 Becoming part of a social group – someone understood my pain (*n* = 6)	*1.1.1 Read about SCO groups (n = 6)*
		1.1.2 Became motivated to keep searching for help (n = 5)
		1.1.3 SCO activity represented a secret digital self – living a double life (n = 6)
	1.2 Searching for SCO – it's like having a close friend (*n* = 7)	*1.2.1 Information on mental health, self-harm, and suicide methods* (n = 7)
		1.2.2 SCO is supportive and comforting – like being in a bubble (n = 5)
		1.2.3 A struggle towards a perfect digital self (n = 4)
	1.3 Getting knowledge about the world – being a witness (*n* = 4)	*1.3.1 Accidentally experienced SCO when following people online with the same interests (n = 4)*
		1.3.2 Get to know how people think and feel in everyday life and extreme life events (n = 2)
		1.3.3 Felt rejected offline – exploring self-boundaries online without consequences (n = 1)
Second meta-theme: "Negative consequences and self-reflection – what am I doing to myself?"	2.1 Increasingly worried for the SCO group members' and their own self-destructive actions (*n* = 6)	*2.1.1 Concerned and tired of sad posts from peoples' lives – feeling responsible to support others (n = 4)*
		2.1.2 Notice how trends online influence self-destructive actions – comparison and competition (n = 6)
	2.2 Feeling dependent and becoming critical to online information (*n* = 5)	*2.2.1 Noticed spending too much time online – felt addicted to SCO (n = 5)*
		2.2.2 Aware of how SCO romanticizes pain and illness (n = 5)
	2.3 Feeling numb and afraid of becoming desensitized (*n* = 4)	*2.3.1 Became less eager to watch extreme content online – didn't want to be triggered (n = 4)*
		2.3.2 Concerned about losing her empathy (n = 2)
Third meta-theme: "A need to take charge – I must take care of myself"	3.1 Being together with good friends offline (*n* = 5)	*3.1.1 Report harmful content, log off, and do something else (n = 5)*
		3.1.2 Talking to a therapist on digital activity and SCO engagement – good to be understood (n = 3)
	3.2 Regulating online activity and SCO engagement – still feeling lonely (*n* = 5)	*3.2.1 Spend as little time online as possible (n = 5)*
		3.2.2 Talking to a therapist – afraid of losing a safety (n = 3)
	3.3 Deciding to stay away from harmful content online (*n* = 7)	*3.3.1 Block people who post harmful content (n = 2)*
		3.3.2 Talking to a therapist – ask directly and mention concrete examples of digital risks (n = 7)

Marianne differentiated between the content she shared with different profiles and described how her SCO activity represented *a secret digital self* (1.1.3):

> I have my usual Instagram profile. . . for my friends from school and football. . . And then I have a semi-private Instagram user for my very, very close friends. And then I have the private-private with people that I haven't really met . . . that none of my regular friends know (. . .) I think I'm more honest there.

Consequently, the "feed" at her anonymous SCO profile included a lot of posts from people who self-harmed or described suicide thoughts or plans. By exploring difficult thoughts and feelings online before doing so offline, she felt like "living a double life;" it was like a secret, but it also made it easier for her to tolerate difficult life experiences.

Searching for SCO – It's like having a close friend

For other participants, like Lena, it was the activity of searching for SCO (1.2) that was of main interest. When she started to struggle with eating problems and self-harm in elementary school, Lena began examining the internet for *information on mental health, self-harm, and suicide methods* (1.2.1): "When I have suicidal thoughts, or want to self-harm, it felt very reassuring. . . and fun to read about it and to plan (. . .) those videos made me feel better." She felt it was impossible to talk to her parents. Since Lena was a little girl, her mother had struggled with depression. Lena did not want to be a burden. The SCO engagement motivated her to cut deeper and to hold on to her suicide plan but at the same time it gave her hope that she could get away from her problems: "I was like 'okay, don't worry, you're going to kill yourself soon, just watch those videos, allow yourself to cry – It's a way out from everything."

When she read and looked at others' SCO posts, she *felt supported and comforted* (1.2.2): "You live in such a bubble; it's like your thing, your way out." The activity of searching for information, reading, and writing her own posts made her relax or provided a distraction from her problems: "It's like having a close friend. (. . .) that helps me, makes me feel safe. I can express my feelings, and it makes me feel less lonely." Like Marianne, Lena described how the SCO reflected her pain, but Lena also underlined how it increased her self-harming. Still, she did not want to tell anyone because it felt like "betraying a good friend."

Lena described a *struggle towards a perfect digital self* (1.2.3): "On Instagram, you often start a kind of illusion, or you only publish the good stuff. So, you kind of create a facade (. . .) focused on making it perfect. It's just not the real thing (. . .) you just lie a bit." Lena felt cool and had a lot of friends online but not offline. She became unsure of what other people meant by their comments – she missed their face expressions. She was also frustrated by her earlier online activity: "I want to be perfect. My social media must be perfect. I must be in control of everything (. . .) All the old messages. . . like 'oh, that annoys me'." Still, even though Lena wanted her "digital self" to be like "a perfect self," searching for SCO may have represented an exploration of unacceptable thoughts, feelings, and difficult self-experiences.

Getting knowledge about the world – Being a witness

Ruby had experiences of loss in close relationships during childhood. As adolescent, she felt lonely even though she had a few friends at school. She began to follow people on Twitter, YouTube or groups on Discord who shared her interests in politics or gaming. In her opinion, social media brought her knowledge of the world (1.3):

> My life would have been much worse if I lost my Internet. I am really connected to the world through social media and especially Twitter. It's part of my everyday routines to see what is happening (. . .) I have learned a lot from YouTube and Discord . . . you can find anything on the Internet.

Different from Lena, Ruby described how she *accidentally experienced SCO when following people online* (1.3.1). While trying to get information on how to pirate a game through Discord, she learned about the Dark Web and Deep Web:

> I knew that if I tried to pirate a game. . . they could track me down with an IP address, so I got a VPN and joined a Discord server to find other people who could VPN. Then they asked what I needed it for, and I said to sort of "to pirate a game". (. . .) A little later I became interested in the Dark Web and the Deep Web, they are very similar, but the Deep Web is much bigger. (. . .) I thought the Dark Web was a bit too creepy, but I often went to the Deep Web. Often the links are private blogs that you must have a link to (. . .) So I had many friends like that. . . not friends, but alliances.

By following links, she became introduced to videos of people playing online games but also videos of extreme life events like car crashes, criminal or violent actions, or people who were starving, hurting, or killing themselves. Ruby emphasized how the engagement brought her a way to *get to know how people think and feel in extreme events* (1.3.2). First, she became afraid that the actions could happen everywhere. She felt an adrenaline kick when someone was hurt or died: "It was like, I shouldn't be

watching this, but oh my god, his head just kind of fell almost all the way down. . . right off. All that blood just spurts out." Finding and watching extreme videos felt all-consuming and she felt an increased tolerance: "Murders for example. Several bloody videos of either several people or one person . . . so much blood. I've seen a lot of it. I have got a high tolerance for watching such videos." Ruby had harmed herself for some years but became triggered by the SCO content to harm herself in new ways.

Ruby tried to share what she was engaged in online with family and friends offline but *felt rejected* (1.3.3): "It just went a little bit wrong then, because they typically feel weirded out or freaked out about what I said. They thought it was a bit too extreme, that I just said something a bit too vulgar." She felt they became overwhelmed, and that it was easier to read and ask questions online. Thus, in her offline everyday life, her "private self" was rejected but by being a witness online Ruby could explore extreme events and gain knowledge of others' thoughts and feelings and explore her self-boundaries online without being afraid of negative consequences.

Second meta-theme: "Negative consequences and self-reflection – What am I doing to myself?"

The second meta-theme shows how the participants increasingly experienced different negative consequences from their SCO engagement and gradually became critical of SCO.

Increasingly worried about the SCO group members' and their own self-destructive actions

Some of the participants described how they increasingly became worried about their own and others' self-destructive actions (2.1). Marianne became *concerned and tired of sad posts* (2.1.1): "I get a bit tired, demotivated, and almost bored (. . .) I'm not always that good at doing something else, but I recognize it." In particular, she felt responsible to support those who struggled. After some years, Marianne became gradually less active online, and her feed began to look different without SCO. She thought less about the other participants and became less engaged by their posts.

The participants emphasized how they *increasingly noticed that trends online influence self-destructive actions* (2.1.2). Some years earlier, Marianne made a suicide attempt together with an online friend. Today, she thought she got the idea from a trend on TikTok:

> It wasn't planned, but then we ended up drinking a lot and taking a lot of Paracetamol together, so that we were picked up by an ambulance and hospitalized (. . .) But in that period there were many others who ran away and took different types of overdoses together. (. . .) Then I didn't feel that I was influenced by what someone else posted. Yes, it was kind of very original.

Marianne highlighted how her self-harming escalated because she compared her harmful actions with those of others:

> I was very good at cutting cuts, I was good at going to the ER. . . so when I saw someone on Instagram who cut themselves deeper, I was like, I don't know, jealous, and "shit, how do you do that" (. . .) felt a bit of a competition.

It became a vicious circle of comparison and competition, escalating self-destructive actions but also seemed to increase self-reflection.

Feeling dependent and becoming critical of online information

After being an engaged member of several SCO groups for some years, Lena noticed how she increasingly felt dependent on the online activity and became critical of online information (2.2). She noticed that she was *spending too much time online* (2.2.1): "You just scroll down, you're in that world and then you can't quite stop, looking at the pictures and. . . yes. (. . .) quickly become addicted." In the beginning, Lena appreciated getting tips on self-harm methods or how to hide the self-destructive acts, but she felt increasingly triggered:

> You get used to seeing blood and scars . . . forcing yourself even if it's disgusting (. . .) and if you think it's difficult to commit suicide, then these videos or pictures make it easier to do it. It pushes you a little.

Today, she thinks her engagement in SCO escalated her self-harming: "It's like letting an alcoholic into the liquor store."

She underlined how *SCO romanticizes pain and illness* (2.2.2) and normalizes the abnormal:

> The videos don't show the negative aspects, that you can get nauseous . . . or how painful it is to self-harm, or that afterwards you must change plasters and bandages, that it is tiring and hard to hide it (. . .) it is romanticized by sad music.

Thus, the feeling of becoming addicted and the romanticizing of SCO content seem to increase reflection of her own self-destructive behaviors.

Theme 2.3 feeling numb and afraid of becoming desensitized

After years of SCO engagement, Ruby noticed that she was feeling numb and became afraid of becoming desensitized (2.3). She became *less eager to watch extreme content online* (2.3.1): "Earlier, I was more willing to open every link without thinking about it. But now, I know which of the links that friends send me are safe, and which links I must watch out for." She tried to avoid videos she was afraid of becoming triggered by: "I know I get traumatized by those videos and I don't want to trigger myself. To be triggered is quite delicious. And you get quite a lot of adrenaline and feel kind of good." She began to protect herself from risky online content. However, after years of engagement with SCO and exploration of the Deep Web, she became *concerned about losing her empathy* (2.3.2):

> I was afraid of how it might go if I didn't react so much (. . .) now I'm sort of desensitized to blood, beheading, suicide, torture, how long can it be before I become desensitized to brutal and violent things and before I feel like doing something myself? (. . .) It's more the fear that I might start to consider it that pulled me away.

She did not want to be like the other people she had met online:

> I see the comments on all the videos and the way people talk (. . .) they don't have empathy. No sympathy at all. They just thought it was fun. And I just don't want to be like those people. It really scared me to think that I could fall to that 'level'.

Thus, it seems that witnessing other group members' self-destructive actions and associated thoughts and feelings increased her reflections on her own actions and personal values.

Third meta-theme: "A need to take charge – I must take care of myself"

The third meta-theme underlines how the participants increasingly felt a need to take control of their online activity and SCO engagement to protect themselves. All of them were in treatment when interviewed, but only a few of them talked to their therapist about their SCO engagement or thought the therapist could help them in this process.

Being together with good friends offline

For Marianne, the key to ending the SCO engagement was to be together with friends (3.1). Marianne advised others to *report harmful content, log off, and do something else* (3.1.1):

> I think a coping strategy is that if I notice that it is becoming very negative, I just log off and do something else (. . .). We did slalom on the weekend, and it was nice to have a reason not to be on social media. I must have something to do to keep me busy.

Now, if she experiences difficulties, she shares her thoughts and feelings with her friends: "If there is something particularly difficult that I am thinking about, I ask one of my friends who I know has knowledge about it, who is also a friend in real life." Having good friends reduced the need for the SCO group.

During treatment, Marianne had a positive experience of *talking to her therapist about online activity and shared SCO engagement* (3.1.2): "I told her about online trends where people ran away

from the institution where they lived and overdosed together, and then we got into this topic of social media." She felt it was good to be understood:

> I think she was amazing. There was zero focus on what I had done wrong, it was like: "I understand that it must be terrible for you now" and she sort of asked me a lot questions like: "okay, but what else happened" (. . .) and she was like "yes, but hello, it's no wonder you did what you did, and it was probably good with that confirmation." I didn't feel judged in any way.

A respectful and non-judgmental attitude from her therapist was essential. Marianne attempted to take charge of their SCO engagement by being with others and choosing to share problems with friends and helpers.

Regulating online activity and SCO engagement – Still feeling lonely

Lena also found a way out of her SCO engagement by increasingly regulating her online activity (3.2). Lena's advice to others *was to spend as little time online as possible* (3.2.1): "It's tempting and addictive and fun, and you can't stop scrolling down. Although you may know what the right thing is, it is difficult to choose the right thing."

Lena had talked to her therapist because he asked directly: "If he hadn't asked, I wouldn't have told him." Still, she *did not want to talk about her SCO engagement* (3.2.2): "I told him about the suicide plan. (. . .) but maybe I have downplayed it a bit (. . .) I haven't emphasized how big effect it has." Importantly, Lena said she was afraid of ending the SCO engagement: "It gives me a feeling of safety and reminds me that there is a way out. If you tell someone, they will destroy it." Even though she attempted to distract herself from self-destructive impulses, she chose to not talk to helpers and still felt lonely after ending her SCO engagement.

Deciding to stay away from harmful content online

Ruby's way out of SCO engagement was to decide to stay away from harmful content online (3.3). Her advice to others was *to block people who post harmful content* (3.3.1). She thought the technology companies should not allow posts with content promoting self-harm or anorexia and be aware of "codes" for SCO content and links to videos:

> There are a lot of people who post videos . . . it's a name for them: "wannarexia" (. . .) who only have these kinds of websites and post links to them in the comment fields, and they have been there for years. They are not shut down. That is problematic.

Ruby wished her therapist had *asked directly and mentioned concrete examples of digital risks* (3.3.2): "Don't protect children and don't think it wouldn't happen to your child, because it will. Just talk to them, give them information. Talk to them as an adult (. . .) Create a safe space around them that makes it safe for them to talk openly to feel better (. . .) Show acceptance and normalize . . . it is nothing to be ashamed of." Ruby attempted to regulate her SCO engagement by avoiding SCO and it was still difficult to share her experiences with others.

Discussion

This analysis shows how young people with experience of mental health problems and self-harm were engaging in SCO to connect with others and to explore difficult experiences in their everyday life. The engagement brought support and comfort but also concern for how SCO activity influences their mental health. Finally, they described a need to take charge of their online engagement. These findings support earlier studies that underline young people's experience of SCO engagement as triggering self-harm *and* a form of social support (Brennan et al., 2022; Marchant et al., 2017; Susi et al., 2023). Our results emphasize how young people's online engagement is *interconnected* with their offline world – their personal and contextual challenges may increase their vulnerability for SCO and the engagement can offer help and hope. In the following, we discuss how SCO engagement can be understood as a way

to gain self-knowledge, to increase self-reflection, and, finally, to motivate self-protection strategies in the digital world which have consequences offline.

Our findings are in line with Shankleman et al. (2021), who state that online activity enables attachment and identity processes with friends and peers during adolescence. The participants in our study experienced that their contact with the SCO groups reduce loneliness (Stänicke, 2022) but underline different ways of getting to know oneself and regulate difficult self-states. For some, like Marianne, it was important to use the digital communities to *share* difficult life experiences, understand others' violent acts and personal problems, and *get validation from others*. For others, like Lena, the act of *seeking* information on mental health issues through the SCO group members' posts also became a means to denote and *represent* her own challenging thoughts and feelings and seemed to increase her self-tolerance. For even others, like Ruby, the SCO activity enabled *witnessing* others' experiences, thoughts, and feelings in extreme life events. The observation brought her knowledge of others' experiences, and she could experience how it *affected* her without being afraid of negative consequences if she had been involved herself.

These findings can be understood according to how the capacity for mentalization is increasing during adolescence and closely influenced by sharing of difficult self-states in close relationships. The online communication may enable an important arena for validation, representation and exploration of self and others' difficult and overwhelming experiences which is essential for developing affect regulation, empathy, and self-understanding (Fonagy et al., 2019). Still, even though it seems that a relational need may motivate SCO engagement, the participants' different involvement with the SCO group members may underline a continuous importance of relational contact offline. Marianne's online friends also became her offline friends with whom she began to meet and share her problems with. Lena was still lonely when she ended her SCO engagement – she still needed a friend. Ruby still needed to continue sharing her thoughts and experiences with friends and family to find someone who did not get overwhelmed. Maybe a common topic for all of them was to integrate their "digital self" and "offline self" and to tolerate "imperfect" or difficult self-experiences. In an online arena, self-experiences may be explored, and it may be easier to share difficulties for some, but developing an integrated self-identity may require closer emotional relationships that perhaps are easier to develop offline.

Earlier studies show how SCO engagement is associated with higher frequency of online activity in general and mental health problems, and a self-reported need for treatment (Memon et al., 2018; Susi et al., 2023). Even though we do not know whether or how SCO engagement causes mental health problems, the results support studies that show how young people themselves perceive SCO engagement as increasing self-harm, triggering self-harm impulses, and inspiring them to try out new self-harming methods (Brennan et al., 2022; Marchant et al., 2017; Susi et al., 2023). The results of our study highlight how young people over time experienced an increased concern for themselves and the other SCO group members. The results nuance earlier findings by showing different pathways that the participants gave meaning to and reflected upon in different ways. Some of the participants, like Marianne, became worried about *both* her own and others' self-destructive actions. It was like a vicious circle of comparison and competition which escalated harmful actions. She began to wonder how she could or should help the other SCO group members and what she was doing toward herself. Others, like Lena, were feeling dependent on the online activity in general and became critical of how SCO romanticizes pain. She reflected upon the way SCO represented self-harm and difficult feelings and thoughts, and how SCO engagement motivated and escalated her own self-destructive actions. Still others, like Ruby, noticed a feeling of numbness when watching others' self-destructive actions and extreme content online and became afraid of becoming desensitized and losing her empathy. Importantly, the participants emphasize how online activity can be an intermediate area in between self and others which may provide opportunities for exploration and processing (Stänicke, 2022) and, still, have consequences in their offline life. Online and offline life seems interconnected – online activities

may increase mental health problem or SCO may provide a distraction or support to reduce self-harm.

The young people who participated in our study described a development from being less critical or responding automatically or having a low threshold for following links and people, toward an attempt to take control of their online activity and SCO engagement by being with other people or regulating online activity (e.g. spending less time online, doing something else) and SCO engagement (e.g. not looking at SCO posts or deleting contacts who post SCO). They described increased self-understanding and self-reflection and, subsequently, different ways of self-protection in a digital age. However, Gruber and Hargittai (2023) argue that being aware of personal data collection may help people understand algorithmic processes but do not necessarily influence the algorithmic content of their social media account. Following these thoughts, it remains unclear whether the young people actually gain control or just gain *a feeling of being in control*. Importantly, even though they obtained help from technological functions or applications to reduce engagement in SCO and/or self-harm, their advice for getting help is to talk to other people about SCO engagement. However, they found it difficult to ask for help by themselves. They wanted to be asked directly and concretely about digital risks and SCO engagement by adults in general and by their therapist specifically. Still, they were ambivalent – the possibility to express themselves freely and the support they received from the SCO material and group members made it difficult to reduce their digital activity.

Limitations

In this study, the sample consisted of young women from a clinical population, which may reduce the findings' relevance for men and other genders or people from a non-clinical sample. However, the aim of this study was not generalizability of the data but analytic generalizability (Levitt et al., 2017), in other words, development of concepts on digital engagement that can be discussed according to findings from other samples. The results should be understood and acknowledged as selective, context-dependent and associated with the researchers' socioeconomic and cultural context of two European countries.

Conclusion

According to young people with mental health problems can engagement in self-harm content online (SCO) increase self-harming but also reduce loneliness and enabling a peer arena for sharing problems, feeling understood, and helping others. Digital risk engagement in SCO can increase self-knowledge, self-reflection, and even self-protection. This knowledge should inform therapists and helpers to develop ways to detect and support vulnerable adolescents online and offline, to understand upsides and downsides of the activity, and the interconnectedness of their online and offline worlds and challenges.

We argue that online activity and SCO engagement can play a role in the development of affect regulation, mentalization, and self-care for vulnerable young people.

Future research

There is a need for studies with longitudinal designs to better understand the consequences of digital risk experiences such as SCO according to individual and contextual recourses, mental health problems and vulnerabilities (Sonuga-Barke et al., 2024). Further, more knowledge is needed on what helps young people to disclose online risk experiences and how helpers and therapists can support young people with these experiences in therapy and treatment.

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Patient anonymization statement

Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned, in accordance with the journal's anonymization policy.

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