Full length article

# Young people's priorities for support on social media: "It takes trust to talk about these issues"

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### ABSTRACT

Online interventions are viewed as having great potential for reaching youth in distress, but little is actually known about how well these interventions fit with young people's own priorities and practices with online support. This New Zealand-based research explored young people's use of social media to give and receive support in informal, peer networks. Data was collected through digital instant messaging interviews with 21 young people aged 16–21 years. A thematic analysis identified a range of priorities participants had for engaging in support online. These included the importance of establishing emotional safety; picking up subtle cues for distress; allowing the open expression of emotion; showing care; being tactful and sensitive to needs of others and developing on-going relationships. Those designing online interventions for youth in distress can learn from the way that young people already give and receive support online. Recognising the importance that young people give to trusting relationships as a prerequisite for engagement with online support has important implications for the development of interventions which can connect with young people.

## 1. Introduction

As professionals explore innovative ways of reaching young people in distress, they are increasingly turning to internet interventions that build on young people's apparent willingness to engage through this medium. However, young people's familiarity with, and knowledge of, online practices is often in advance of that of researchers and clinicians who are attempting to design interventions in new terrain. An exploration of the way that young people give and receive support in informal peer networks on social media may provide important insights that can contribute to the development of online strategies that connect with young people in distress.

### 1.1. Online interventions for youth mental health

While young people are said to experience the highest rates of mental health problems and distress of any age group, very few will approach a professional for help (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007; Mariu, Merry, Robinson, & Watson, 2012; McGorry, Bates, & Birchwood, 2013). Barriers in the way of young people seeking support have been found to include young people's investment in their own autonomy, mental health stigma, and services which are inappropriate or inaccessible to young people (Gulliver, Griffiths, &

Christensen, 2010; Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007). The digital revolution has opened up new spaces for young people to seek out mental health support. Online help-seeking is particularly well-matched to young people who value the independence, privacy and, sometimes, anonymity this medium of communication allows (Kauer, Mangan, & Sanci, 2014). Young people have also been found to more easily discuss sensitive issues online than face-to-face (Callahan & Inckle, 2012). The immediacy and accessibility of online support in the moment of feeling distressed is another important advantage for 'digital natives' who have grown up with 24 h online access to communication (Prensky, 2001). This generation of young people have also had ample opportunity to develop their skills in textual and image-based communication and may feel more at home using these modes of exchange (Turkle, 2011). .

Clinicians and researchers are increasingly exploring the potential of online support to reach young people in distress. This includes developing and investigating the value of online mental health information available online (Gowen, 2013); text-based counselling support (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014); digital computer games (Merry et al., 2012) and social media interventions that aim to identify those with high levels of distress or suicidality so that they can receive targeted support (Robinson et al., 2015).

However, in researchers' enthusiasm to develop online strategies to improve young people's mental health, they might overlook the need

for more nuanced understandings of how online support works in the social networks that young people use. Further knowledge in this area is essential for being able to envisage and design interventions that fit with young people's actual online practices and priorities.

## 1.2. Informal peer support online

Ito et al. (2009) highlight the significance of the internet for young people as a place in which they can privately establish communities and friendships without adult surveillance or involvement. Given that young people are, on the whole, more willing to confide in friends than professionals or other adults (Michelmore & Hindley, 2012), it is unsurprising that young people are using the internet to share experiences of distress and provide support to one another. Interactions that occur naturally between peers in online contexts might play an important role in providing support for those experiencing distress (Ziebland & Wyke, 2012). This parallels the growing awareness of peer support as a helpful part of face-to-face mental health services more generally (Chinman et al., 2014).

Naslund, Grande, Aschbrenner, and Elwyn (2014; 2016) have conducted a number of studies which highlight the function of online peer support for people with mental health problems. This work suggests that online peer networks have the potential to facilitate reciprocal support, reduce isolation, offer a sense of hope as well as provide strategies for coping with mental health problems. Naslund et al.'s research focusses on adults with severe mental health problems but may also have implications for young people who experience distress. There is also a small body of research that has begun to explore the way that youth use online peer forums to talk about distress in the context of professionally-moderated forums specifically designed to facilitate mental health support (e.g. Greidanus & Everall, 2010; Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi, 2017). This research has provided useful information about the development of reciprocal help-seeking in these communities, but it is important to develop our understanding of the rules of engagement for giving and receiving support in the unregulated and largely hidden online spaces that make up young people's everyday social media use (Elmquist & McLaughlin, 2017). Specifically, it would be helpful to know how young people understand online support to work, how they signal the need for support, what kinds of responses are understood as being supportive and the meaning these supportive engagements hold for young people.

## 1.3. Researching social media support

One of the primary challenges in researching how people use social media for support is a methodological one. Some studies have used face-to-face interviews or focus groups in which they ask people about their social media use (e.g. Singleton, Abeles, & Smith, 2016). This method allows people to reflect on and explain the meanings their practices hold for them, but it might also present difficulties in terms of accurately capturing the multi-media nature of online of practices. In an attempt to resolve this problem, some researchers have used online ethnographies in which they observe actual online practices (e.g. Naslund et al., 2014). This kind of research is invaluable, but rarely allows access to the intentions and meanings attributed to online interactions by the actors involved. Surveys have been used to access people's understanding of their own online practices (e.g. Lawlor & Kirakowski, 2014), but while these can be conducted online and offer the anonymity and ease of textual communication, their format often limits the depth of response that can be obtained. Some researchers have recently promoted 'go-along' methods in which they sit alongside the participant and talk with them while they engage in their usual online practices (e.g. Raun, 2017). These methods provide unique access to knowledge about online practices but the effect of having an adult researcher sit alongside a young person may significantly alter their usual behaviour. Digital messaging interviews using social media

technology might have potential to offer unique insights into the way that young people use online support. They allow young people to communicate in the familiar medium of text with the advantages of the in-depth of exploration allowed by an interview. This method also offers the opportunity to share examples of multi-media communications typical of social media interaction. Digital communication may also be particularly useful in research with young people as it dilutes the power of the researcher and reduces the challenges for young people of engaging face-to-face with an adult on sensitive issues (Fox, Morris and Rumsely, 2013).

A further methodological challenge in the research of online practices relates to the breadth and complexity of online engagements. Most researchers have chosen to focus narrowly on support interactions on one specific platform or forum e.g. YouTube (Naslund et al., 2014), Facebook (Lerman et al., 2017), or Tumblr (Ali & Gibson, 2019). This, however, may not capture the more dynamic way that young people use multiple social media platforms to communicate. Ito et al. (2009) show that young people's engagement with social media is complex, involving movement between different social media platforms as well as between public, private and anonymous spaces. It is important to develop our understanding of young people's peer support practices in this context.

Research on youth mental health has historically positioned young people as the recipients of professional care and has paid less attention their role as active participants in their own well-being. However, new approaches to research with young people recognise the value of drawing from their knowledge on issues that concern them directly and promote participatory methods of data collection (Wyn & Harris, 2004). Indeed, young people's knowledge and expertise in social media may be better developed than adult researchers sometimes assume, and has the potential to contribute significantly towards our understanding of this area. These developments in research parallel a growing awareness of the role that young people can play in participating in the design of mental health interventions that fit with their priorities (Thabrew, Flemming, Hetrick, & Merry, 2018).

The aim of the research described in this article was to gain insight into the way that young people understand support on social media. The purpose was to advance an understanding of how online peer support networks operate and, in particular, to explore how they work for young people who might use them in unique ways. This has the potential to inform the design of online interventions that can reach young people more effectively. The study also offered an opportunity to try out an innovative digital messaging interview method to examine young people's social media practices.

## 2. Methods

This New Zealand-based study explored the ways that young people use social media to give and receive support. The research is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology which recognises that both the researchers' and participants' views are influenced by prevailing discourses that shape key concepts such as 'youth' and 'mental health' as well as what constitutes psychological support. We drew actively from a youth empowerment research approach which prioritises young people's voices (Wyn & Harris, 2004). As researchers, we were aware of our power relative to young people and tried to maintain a reflexive awareness of the potential for our views to prevail over the perspectives of the participants.

The research was approved by the Human Participants Ethics Committee at the University of Auckland. In considering the project's ethical implications we were particularly aware of the sensitivity of the research question and the potential for distress and other of mental health risks for interview participants. The first author, a clinical psychologist, conducted the interviews and took care to communicate gently and respectfully with the participants. Those who seemed distressed were given the contact details of support agencies they could

access.

## 2.1. Recruitment

Recruitment was conducted through several pathways. The primary method was through social media adverts on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit as well as through the social media networks of a range of local youth organisations. The study was also advertised through posters in places where young people are known to gather (e.g. universities, youth clubs etc.). The advertising material called for participants between the ages of 16 and 21 years, who used social media to give and/or receive support, to take part in a digital interview. Over a period of eight months, 33 participants expressed an interest in participating and 21 went on to complete an interview. Some of those who did not choose to continue said they had other commitments and in some cases simply did not respond to follow up texts or emails. Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form for the research via email and gave written consent to participate at the start of the digital research interview.

## 2.2. Participants

Twenty-one participants between the ages of 16 and 21 years took part in the study, including 12 young women, six young men and three who identified as gender diverse. Seventeen participants described themselves as heterosexual, two were gay or lesbian and two described themselves as 'questioning'. The majority described themselves as New Zealand European (16), three as being of Asian origin, one identified as Māori and another as a migrant from the United Kingdom. The majority of participants came from one of the major cities in New Zealand while three came from smaller towns or rural areas. The largest number of participants (11) were studying in a tertiary institution, six were high school students, three were working full-time and one participant was on a disability benefit. Most of the participants (17) said they regularly used three or more social media platforms to communicate. The social media platforms they used included Facebook (including Messenger), Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Discord, Twitter, Reddit and YouTube. Most participants were heavy users of social media, saying they used it three to 4 hours each day. Three participants said that were on social media "all day".

## 2.3. Data collection

The decision to conduct interviews using digital messaging was influenced by our wish to allow young people an opportunity to articulate their perspective through a medium which allowed them greater power and control. The method was also seen to be a particularly good fit with the subject matter of the interview. The digital interviews were conducted via the online instant messaging platform WhatsApp which is easily accessible as a free app and has a reputation for good data security.

The interview began with a set of demographic questions that enquired about the participant's age, gender, sexuality, culture, where they lived and their employment or study. Participants were also asked for details about which social media platforms they used and how often. The body of the interview was semi-structured and began with the initial prompt question: 'Do you see yourself as someone who mainly gives or gets support online or both?' Participants were then asked a range of other questions about giving support online including how they identified someone who needed support, what kinds of posts they usually responded to and how they responded to the posts they described. They were also asked about whether and how they asked for support for themselves and the kinds of responses that they saw as more or less helpful. Participants were asked to give examples of typical interactions and were also told that they could provide screenshots of online interactions to illustrate their responses and were assured that

these would be de-identified to protect third party information. Given the novelty of the method, the interviewer experimented with the style of questioning to ensure good quality responses and maintain rapport. An informal style of questioning including devices such as emojis, text speak, ellipses and other punctuation to convey an informal tone was found to elicit more in-depth responses from participants. Previous research has noted that digital message interviews tend to garner less data compared with face-to-face interviews (Jowett, Peel, & Shaw, 2011) but that did not pose a significant problem in this research. Interviews lasted between one and 2 h and the majority of transcriptions were between 2000 and 3000 words long, excluding screenshots. These transcripts were shorter compared with transcriptions of audio interview data in previous interview research we have conducted with participants in this age group but were relatively more densely detailed. The quality of the interview material was judged to be sufficiently rich to support the analysis (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016).

## 2.4. Data analysis

The thematic analysis took a deductive approach with the aim of identifying themes in the data related to the question of how young people understood support to work on social media (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the research question provided the lens through which the data was interpreted, specific themes were not determined in advance but were identified in the process of analysis.

The data was fully transcribed using technology which converted the WhatsApp conversation record into a word document. Screenshots were copied into the document and described textually in the transcript (e.g. a picture of arm showing cut marks with caption saying: 'Life's not out to get you despite what you've been through'). In order to retain the specificity of textual communication, participants' written responses were included in the thematic analysis verbatim, without correcting for grammar or spelling errors.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, the first author began by reading and re-reading the data to become familiar with the content. Data which specifically related to the question of how participants understood online support to work was sorted into initial codes. These codes were then tentatively grouped into overarching categories that captured patterns in the data which were then shaped into themes. The themes were refined through discussion between the first and second author in an approach that draws from a consensual model of data analysis (Hill, 2015). This approach, which is consistent with a social constructionist epistemology, sees respectful debate and discussion within the research team as an opportunity to hone or challenge interpretations. As recommended by Hill, the researchers re-visited the data to reconcile any differences in interpretation that could not be resolved through discussion.

## 3. Results

During the interview most participants identified themselves as people who predominantly supported others online but almost all had sought support for themselves at times. Our analysis reflects this dual positioning of participants as givers and receivers of support, conceptualising support as a reciprocal process rather than a uni-directional activity. Furthermore, while some data extracts reflected the standpoint of the person providing support and others, the perspective of the person receiving it, there were common priorities that allowed us to identify themes that cut across the experience of both giving and receiving support. A summary of the main themes can be found in Table 1 [insert Table 1 about here].

## 3.1. Establishing safety: "you only share things with those you trust"

Our data suggests that young people engage in a process of searching for, and finding, protected networks to talk about their

**Table 1**
Themes.

| Themes | Sample data extracts |
| --- | --- |
| Establishing safety | *It takes trust to talk about these issues.* |
| | *And obviously read the group rules making sure there is focus on being respectful.* |
| Picking up cues for distress | *do you understand what i mean by when i said it's a bit sly and asking for people to respond kinda thing.* |
| | *I did not want to ask directly at all. Yeah you can just hint.* |
| Showing care. | *I want them to know that people do care so I reach out…. By just asking how are you and commenting I'm trying to let them know I'm here for them without forcing them to tell me what's wrong.* |
| | *Responses checking in or asking how I am are helpful because it lets me know that people care…* |
| Expressing emotions. | *I basically just let her get stuff of her chest because I know she cant tell most people.* |
| | *I think most times when people want to vent they don't care who's listening it's just typing all of those feelings down and letting it out can be such a huge weight off your chest.* |
| Exercising tact. | *I would ask about it but if they don't want to talk about it I respect their privacy.* |
| | *Yeah and sometimes they don't want to open up or say they're "fine" so I usually would take the conversation in a different direction because I don't want to make them uncomfortable or force them to talk.* |
| Developing relationships. | *Yes this is common, sometimes the conversation starts face to face, then is carried on online. … I'm pretty open with my friends, though I do feel more comfortable going deeper into things through messenger.* |
| | *it's more that Im placing more trust in them and so feel closer to them. or that I know they're placing trust in me, so I feel closer to them.* |

distress or to offer support. Without exception, participants described being conscious of the need for "safety" – both their own and that of others – when talking about distress. In particular, they described a complex set of arrangements that protected the privacy of users on social media and ensured that they communicated only with those who might be sympathetic. One young man, for example, explained in depth how young people had multiple accounts on Instagram with only their innermost circle being used for support:

> So, a lot of high schoolers including myself have a "main instagram account" where they post all their 'good photos' of holidays and outing etc as well as a private second account where we post things we wouldn't post on the 'main'. So i would say the range of number of followers for a private account would be say around 60–120 ish people depending on who you are consisting of closer friends and essentially people are more open about feelings and showing sides of their life that aren't as amazing as say going overseas, to the beach, party etc. to post on their main account which is open to everyone … i know of many people who even have a third account which would have around 20 followers …. third accounts would obviously be closer friends and i feel that's where people would open up the most.

The purpose of these private groups was to allow friends to communicate more freely about sensitive issues. As one participant explained: "It's like a safe space for young people to be open about their life but in a restrictive manner where only the friends they trust can see this.' The necessity for trust as a prerequisite for engaging with online support was reiterated by many of the participants and captured succinctly in the words of one participant who stated: "It takes trust to talk about these issues." The objective of these private groups was not only to bring friends together but also to exclude those who might threaten the safety of the group. This included not only people who could not be trusted to be sympathetic but also parents and other adults: As one participant put it: "A lot of adults don't know about these private Instagram accounts for obvious reasons".

Participants did describe that support was more open in "friend groups" where safety seemed to be protected by a set of unspoken rules. Several participants described how they negotiated safety in these contexts by responding only to posts from those they knew well personally and shifting the conversation quickly from public into private online channels Some participants conveyed the sense that it would be considered inappropriate to engage in support in public spaces:

> I don't really supportively comment on people I don't know very well because it often doesn't feel like the right place but if anyone I knew posted something distressing I would message them and ask them how they are.

One participant articulated the difference she saw between a public and a private post in this way:

> Generally if I reply to something public I'll keep the response really short. I feel like public comments are more like letting the sender know you care about them and DMs [direct messages] are more in depth. If the person who posted seems more distressed I'll most likely DM them because everything that is public is often brief and fairly meaningless.

While most participants engaged in giving or receiving support only in friendship groups, there were a few who spoke about offering support to strangers in online support forums of various kinds. It was clear, however, that even in this context safety remained a priority with clear rules for participation and careful moderation affording the protection that would, in other contexts, be offered through shared friendship. One young woman, for example, described her requirements for engaging in supportive communication in open support forums:

> You want a group with 2 + admins so its monitored closely and comments that are reported getting taken down fast. And obviously read the group rules making sure there is focus on being respectful.

In these support groups the sense of safety seemed to be enhanced by the recognition that the purpose of the group was to get support, as one participant put it: "everyone is just honest about how they are feeling because your fb friends dont see your posts and trolls/people who comment mean things get kicked out."

Some participants also described how they felt safe in networks where they could communicate anonymously. Several participants referred specifically to the relatively recently developed gaming social media platform, Discord, which allows people to chat anonymously while gaming:

> Certainly, maybe its the anonymity of Discord … And with that too I think talking to people about these issues you often can get really close really fast- because of the trust that it does take to talk about these issues, which could lead them to be far more honest about it.

Although anonymity in itself seemed to facilitate support, the last quote highlights the growing sense of trust between those who participate in these anonymous online communities. As one participant summarised it: "You only share things with those you trust".

The overall sense was that participants actively sought channels in which they felt safe enough to engage in giving and receiving support. In particular they sought emotional safety which was dependent on trust between individuals or in the forums themselves.

## 3.2. Picking up cues for distress: "you just hint"

Participants described how online support involved being alert to the range of ways that distress might be expressed online. A few participants mentioned direct requests for help and support on social media during the interview. One of the screenshots provided by a participant, for example, included a post that said:

> [name] is feeling dysphoric [sad emoji]. If anyone wants to send me messages of validation it would be much appreciated right now.

This, overt request for help was, however, a relatively unusual example and more commonly, participants spoke about people "hinting" more obliquely at distress on social media. Participants described how they 'read between the lines' in recognising expressions of distress. One participant provided a series of examples of these indirect expressions of distress:

> so today a friend of mine posted on her third account saying "why is nothing making sense" … another example is someone posting a photo rolling their eyes but without a caption…

She went on to explain: "do you understand what i mean by when i said it's a bit sly and asking for people to respond kinda thing."

Participants described a range of ways that people might 'show' that they were distressed including humour. One participant explained how she understood these lighter comments to carry more serious meaning: "Well for me I always assume any joke someone makes or funny suicide depression meme has some truth to it". In another case, a participant described how she understood aggressive posts as a cry for help: "like when I was a kid and got hurt my parents coming over to hug me would only make me feel more upset and I'd lash out at them … so I think it's something that I personally recognise in others". Some participants seemed to have trained themselves to be particularly alert to signs that a person might be experiencing mental health problems as one participant put it: "Well I mean I always watch for warning signs, depressed posting, distance from talking for a while".

In addition to these subtle signs of distress, participants described how they recognised general changes in the online behaviour of friends as an indication of distress. As one participant explained:

> It's usually when people suddenly stop posting happy smiling pictures or place captions on their posts which aren't their usual selves that I ask how they are feeling…

Participants explained that it was easier to spot the distress of people who were close friends. One participant elaborated a recent experience of this:

> A good example is my best friend who in October posted on her Instagram and wasn't quite her usual self [provided screen shots of her friend's usual jokey posts and then one from her saying: 'Wish time wouldn't go by so fast.']. I reached out to her and asked why she felt that way and we talked about it.

Knowledge of the context of online posts helped some participants recognise distress. One participant, for example, described how she noticed a change in her friend's posting style and put it together with other information she had about her to recognise her distress: "She isn't a very emotional person online and I knew at the time she was going through a hard time with her mum." In another case a participant described a change in the volume of her communication with a friend as an indication she was distressed:

> Well yeah, because we had been talking all the time it seemed in the last few days and then she suddenly wasn't being as responsive and started giving shorter less detailed replies.

Following this interaction the participant asked his friend how she was and she went on to confide a recent very distressing experience that she had not told anyone else about.

The analysis suggested that participants were reading emotional cues from social media communication in much the same way as one might recognise and respond to non-verbal indications of distress. One participant articulated this as a particular skill of a generation who had grown up with internet communication:

> The thing though that shouldn't be discounted is the actual different type of vernacular that comes with growing up in the digital age. A full stop at the end of the sentence conveys exactly the mood of the conversation. Even a capital letter, or lack thereof at the beginning of a sentence is telling to the persons emotions.

Participants also provided insights from their own experience into the kinds of motivations that might make young people prefer to communicate their distress indirectly rather than overtly:

> More or less because I was ashamed of being depressed but still needed the help but didn't quite know how to get the help as I did not want to ask directly at all. Yeah you can just hint.

Participants seemed to feel a need to respond to indirect communications, even in situations where the message was ambiguous: "The hints don't necessarily scream that someone is needing help but it's always good to check up anyway". As another participant put it: "like if your not sure just flick a message hows it going because if its not true you have still brightened their day."

This analysis suggests that distress was not generally expressed overtly on social media and that it mostly had to be read through subtle hints or changes in the person's habitual style and content of communicating. Some knowledge of the person's usual social media communication facilitated the ability to recognise these subtle cues.

## 3.3. Showing care: "someone is out there"

Participants largely seemed to understand support as any communication that helped a person feel that someone had noticed their distress and cared. Initial responses to a post that expressed distress mostly seemed to elicit a simple question designed to let the poster know that their distress had been recognised and that someone was concerned for them: "Are you ok?"; "i hope you're okay i'm always here" or "hey you alg [alright] ? Saw your insta x". Other participants provided screenshots exemplifying how a supportive presence could be conveyed through a heart emoji or a cheerful animal picture.

While some of these expressions of support developed into further conversations, many of the participants conveyed the view that a simple response of the sort described above was all that was required to let the person know that they were not alone with their distress. One participant explained the significance of these responses as follows:

> I think people are seeing if anyone cares with sharing or liking these kinds of posts and I want them to know that people do care so I reach out…. By just asking how are you and commenting I'm trying to let them know I'm here for them without forcing them to tell me what's wrong.

Less commonly, some participants described more expansive comments in response to a post indicating distress. These examples conveyed the intended meaning of these initial communications more overtly:

> I might say something like I'm really sorry you're going through what you're going through at the moment, but just know that your family and your friends, including me, are always here to support you with anything.

If an additional response was needed, some participants explained how they might sometimes offer 'affirmations' that were intended to make the person feel better about themselves. One participant, for example described how this might follow on from a query about whether the person was 'ok':

It's sort of rare I get taken up on the offer on tumblr, but it'd go something like the person messaging me saying 'hi, are you still k to talk' or something and I'd say yes and comfort them and compliment them a lot.

Participants provided a number of screenshots with examples of validation they might give in response to a distress post including: "you're amazing wonderful and gorgeous and i'm honoured to know you and call you a friend. i love you!' or "im proud of u for doing ur best."

On the receiving end of this kind of support, one participant elaborated on how she felt comforted by the thought that someone "cared" enough to respond to her posts online:

Responses checking in or asking how I am are helpful because it lets me know that people care, sometimes people just remind me that they love me and that's probably the most helpful because if I'm worthy of their love I must be alright then.

Referring to a screenshot of a supportive response she had received from someone she commented further:

It's nice to know that someone put effort into writing that whole thing out for little old me…. There are no 'unhelpful' responses because it's still someone taking the time to reply to me or to message me and that helps

Participants also emphasised how important these simple responses were in helping them to feel that they were not alone. As one participant put it:

I have depression and anxiety and know how it tricks your mind saying you are all alone … so you need other people to step in and prove that there are people who care.

It was rare for participants to talk about 'advice' as a form of support and the few times this word was mentioned it seemed either to be presented as secondary to emotional affirmation or as a mutual sharing with people who had been in similar circumstances. One participant, for example, explained that 'advice' in his view was more closely related to emotional comfort than information: "I wouldn't normally ask for advice if I didn't think the person could relate … I guess it's because it provides reassurance that everything is gonna work out and support seen as though you're not the only one with these issues."

In general participants seemed to understand these, often minimal, supportive responses as a signal that someone cared and that the person was not alone with their distress.

### 3.4. Expressing emotions: "people want to vent"

Participants recognised being able to express distress and be "listened to" as a key ingredient in online support. Social media provided a unique space in which young people could "talk" openly about distress. The word "venting" was frequently used to convey process in which young people were able to safely express their emotions as the following quote suggests: "It's more of a place to vent. I guess you could compare it to having an online diary … I used to vent and express my feelings where only the friends you trust can see this."

Venting was largely seen as a helpful process which was contrasted with an unhealthy "bottling up" of emotion:

If I felt bad and messaged someone needing their support and they took hours to reply I'd find that I wouldn't want to talk about it by the time they could. The need to talk would pass but it would result in an accumulation of negativity would could result in a larger upset later on.

Participants felt that young people had few safe places in which to express emotion and saw social media as a particularly important forum for doing this as one participant explained:

I know some people dont have people to do that irl [in real life] either because they dont have good support or because they aren't as honest irl as they are on social media.

Many of the participants commented on the unique features of online communication which enabled more open expression of emotion. These comments seemed to relate to a sense of "distance" in online communication which provided a protection against feeling vulnerable:

The main difference is that it's easier to talk about deeply personal things when you're not face-to-face with someone. There's something about that distance that makes it easier to open up.

Several participants spoke about how some people, and particularly males, felt restricted in off-line contexts by expectations that they should not show weakness. One young man who had been discussing his own experience of distress poignantly noted: "Maybe it's too do with the ability to say what you need to, without showing emotion, eg you couldn't tell if I was crying or the like."

Other participants noted how the immediacy of social media also made it easier to talk about distress in the moment of they experienced this. One participant, for example, spoke about how she used Facebook Messenger to communicate distress with her friends: "It's convenient for me to message her first, especially if I really need to talk to someone urgently."

Participants felt that allowing this space for people to express distress was an important part of providing support: "I basically just let her get stuff of her chest because I know she cant tell most people." While several of the participants expressed the view that "venting" was helpful in and of itself, most also acknowledged that it was also important to feel that they were being listened to. Indeed, many participants felt that a major part of their support role on social media was simply to "listen":

I don't think it's about what I say as much as how much I listen. With my close friends I will prompt them to tell me what is wrong. I will support with a "yeah that's shitty".

While some participants spoke about occasionally trying to offer friends "a different perspective" on their problems, most reinforced the idea that listening was more important than any information or advice they could provide. One participant expressed this directly: "i've learnt that people don't want advice but more for someone to listen!!" As another participant explained "but I think most times people do just really want to feel heard and not necessarily be offered solutions."

This participant went on to say that he only needed to offer minimal responses to create a space for people to talk:

I will receive a huge block of text and may just reply with a "yeah that sucks. Where to from now?" Or even interject between messages with a classic "yikes" or "oof" or even just a ":/"I think most times when people want to vent they don't care who's listening it's just typing all of those feelings down and letting it out can be such a huge weight off your chest.

In many cases when participants saw someone in distress they offered them the opportunity to talk, privately, in more detail about a problem. Responses such as: "if you want to talk I'm right here" or "message me" seemed to be a common way of encouraging further expression.

Participants generally felt that social media provided a unique forum in which young people could express their distress in a way that they could not do in other contexts. Allowing a space for people to express their distress and indications of "listening" were seen as central to support.

### 3.5. Exercising tact: 'I don't want to make them uncomfortable"

Participants described how it was important to be tactful and

sensitive to others' needs in providing support online. They cautioned against being intrusive and spoke about how they tailored their overtures to what they thought the recipient might want.

Participants conveyed the careful consideration they gave to decisions about to whom it was appropriate to offer support. Most of the participants recognised that it was important to have a particular kind of relationship (or network or relationships) within which support would be acceptable and adapted their responses to different degrees of intimacy. As one participant explained:

Alot of the time i don't feel like i'm close enough to message them and help. i kinda know that they wouldn't be asking for my help but rather someone closer … yeah, if i feel i am close enough to them to help them i will message … if not i will like the post as a way of to acknowledge their emotion, or comment something positive.

But even amongst friends, participants indicated that it was important to be aware of the possibility of intruding in their private space:

I would feel a bit intrusive if I reached out to people I didn't know as well … Yeah, or if it's close friends I would reach out to see how they're doing…. I would ask about it but if they don't want to talk about it I respect their privacy.

In general it seemed participants were trying to balance respect for a person's privacy with the desire to let them know that "someone was there for them." One participant provided screenshots that conveyed his attempt to signal support while also respecting that the person might not wish to talk:

Hey man you want to talk?

Thank u I'd rather not.

Alright. I'll be up for a while longer if you change your mind.

Other participants similarly spoke about how they tactfully negotiated the person's wishes during online conversations, changing tack when they were given an indication that the person did not want to talk further about their distress:

Yeah and sometimes they don't want to open up or say they're "fine" so I usually would take the conversation in a different direction because I don't want to make them uncomfortable or force them to talk.

One participant offered the following detailed account of the typical way she would manage a sensitive online conversation:

I usually manage the conversation just by controlling the flow of it, which is a balance of expressing sympathy and understanding, and trying to move to whatever I need to ask next. With most people they either just say okay and shift the conversation to how I am and I let the conversation flow that way but at the end let them know I am here for them if they want to talk or they just say they are not okay and I listen to then rant and offer to hang out or something to help with how they feel.

Most of the participants were very clear that they did not want to push anyone to the point that they were obviously uncomfortable: "Sometimes people don't respond and that's okay - when that happens I respect their privacy and move on." However, even when they were given a clear message that their help was not needed at that time, they made of point of letting people know that they would be available if they changed their minds:

The sensitivity that participants showed towards others seems largely to have come from awareness of their own needs in online support. As one participant put it:

Everyone is different in how they respond to support and the type of support that works for them, but I know that I don't like when people probe me too much about personal things that I might not be

ready to talk to them about yet.

On the whole participants noted the importance of responding tactfully and non-intrusively to online distress. They explained the significance of recognising different people's needs and adjusting their response, including the pace and direction of the conversation accordingly. Ultimately, the wishes of the person who had expressed distress was the most important element in determining what support should be provided.

### 3.6. Developing relationships: "It's a good way of getting to know people."

Participants seemed to view giving and receiving support on social media as part of the development of a new relationship or the deepening of an on-going friendship. They recognised that young people might use social media in different ways, but most of those who took part in this study emphasised the value they found in "connection" and "friendship" through social media.

For most participants giving or receiving support on social media was just another way of engaging supportively within their friendship networks. Many participants spoke about how the unique features of social media made it easier to broach sensitive conversations with friends than in "in real life". As one participant explained it:

I definitely like asking how they are etc online first because I guess it takes off the awkwardness off the situation. Often asking someone how they are in person can be quite confronting and the person might not be expecting such question. Online however, they can take their time in replying, making the situation a bit more comfortable for them.

For several participants being able to talk online allowed them to overcome some of the fears that constrained their offline communications:

Yes this is common, sometimes the conversation starts face to face, then is carried on online. … I'm pretty open with my friends, though I do feel more comfortable going deeper into things through messenger.

In some cases this had given people the courage to raise issues they might not otherwise have been able to confront. This was particularly significant for some participants who identified as gender or sexuality diverse.

occasionally talking about stuff online can give people the courage to talk about stuff outside of the internet … I know that if I hadn't talked to other LGBTQ + people that I wouldn't be out to some of my irl friends rn [right now].

Participants also explained that being able to talk online about sensitive issues opened up the possibility for further discussion offline:

Yea sure, it's usually easier to do off-line but some people are more open online when than there not standing in front of everyone when they say something personal. Issues will usually be brought up online first and then to finish it up it'll usually be talked about off-line.

One participant explained how he felt that online support discussions created a higher level of trust between people that translated into a closer connection with them in real life:

there's always a bit of difference in the emotion when I first see them again, but it's not that it's awkward, it's more that Im placing more trust in them and so feel closer to them. or that I know they're placing trust in me, so I feel closer to them.

This participant and others conveyed dynamic interchange between online and offline support conversations. Many participants spoke about how their offline friends formed the basis of the online groups in which they engaged in support and also emphasised how online

conversations deepened offline friendships. Some also provided examples of how online support had facilitated offline support. One participant, for example explained how when he saw someone express distress online he made a point of being kinder to that person when he saw them in a real world context:

> but if i see something of someone not in the best situation if i was to see them at school i would be nicer and probably not joke too much with them about things that could offend them.. i kinda think thats a little part of why people post such posts - just to let people know they're not in the best state.

Another participant offered detailed account of how, after months of being bullied at school, he messaged a friend online: "I hadn't seen him at school for a little while and wondered what was going on. This wasn't something I did so he just asked me if I was OK. And i said nah, not really." This exchange allowed him to reveal the bullying and as a result his friend "made a point" of talking with him at school each day.

The development of friendships was also important for those engaging in forums where interaction remained primarily online. One participant, a young man, had spoken about how he struggled to communicate his emotions and explained how he found a way to give support by simply "hanging out" with online friends on Discord:

> It was as simple as playing an online game with them as it gave them company. They don't really like sharing but rather know someone is out there for them. Then we'd chill and shoot zombies or something. I'd poke to check if they would talk about it like "hey so I heard what happened … And they'd usually respond with like "yeah I'm okay".

Many described how those they engaged with on various social media forums had become real friends. One participant described the genuine friendships she had developed through Discord:

> I do a lot of gaming so that's originally why I got it, but it's developed into far more of a social thing where YouTubers or other groups make "Communities" in their servers where people just talk and hang out. I've been in a few where they have specific "channels" dedicated to people seeking and giving support like that. So I met most of these kids through those servers and we've become closer friends since then.

Similarly, another participant explained how she had been able to develop a network of friends through her involvement on anonymous Reddit forums: "It's a good feeling being able to help people. And it's a good way of getting to know people or making friends."

Although almost all participants recognised the value of online support, a few said they preferred to give support to friends where they could hear and see them: "I feel talking online briefly online can get the conversation going but I would definitely prefer giving support face to face." However, participants generally recognised the giving and receiving of support on social media as part of a process of developing relationships. In many cases there was seen to be a reciprocal interaction between the building of relationships on and offline.

## 4. Discussion

While it might have been assumed that young people's online support practices would differ in fundamental ways to their offline help-seeking, this research suggests that young people still prefer to talk about distress with people they know, even in a digital environment (Gulliver et al., 2010; Rickwood et al., 2007). The significance of trusting peer relationships in young people's engagement with social media support emerged across a number of themes in the analysis. It was evident in the way that participants actively negotiated emotional safety for themselves before they were willing to talk about sensitive issues online. It was present in the corresponding requirement for closeness before they responded to a request for support. Furthermore, both providers and recipients of support clearly understood support as

synonymous with showing care and concern, rather than providing information or advice. Finally, these online support engagements were not regarded as isolated exchanges, but were clearly seen by young people as part and parcel of the development of friendships, both on and offline.

In addition, the findings of this study support existing research suggesting that young people feel more able to talk about distress in online communication (Callahan & Inckle, 2012; Gibson & Cartwright, 2014. Young people can feel vulnerable discussing sensitive issues in face-to-face encounters, and digital communication allows for greater honesty and openness. This highlights the value of the internet as a valuable site of support for young people. Importantly, this research also points to the way that online honesty might facilitate offline sharing, and highlights the potential for using online support as a gateway to developing better offline support.

Reassuringly, this research also challenges popular representations of young people as irresponsible on social media. In contrast with this view, the analysis suggests that young people are thoughtful, careful and sensitive in the way that they engage with online support. Participants were highly aware of their own privacy and emotional safety needs as well as those of others. They described sensitive and nuanced responses to distress, demonstrating a high level of concern for those with whom they engaged online.

One of the most compelling incidental findings of this research was young people's skill in communicating through social media. Participants' examples highlighted their ability to express emotion online, through words and images, and demonstrated their expertise in reading subtle expressions of distress on social media. This suggests that participants have well-developed online emotional literacy. Given the difficulties that young people have in communicating distress, this medium may provide an important channel through which they can do this (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014).

While the young people in this study emphasised that social media was an important source of support for them and their peers, questions remain about whether these informal peer interactions online are effective in helping people manage distress (Alvarez-Jimenez, Gleeson, Rice, Gonzalez-Blanch, & Bendall, 2016). Whether or not they do work to reduce distress, it is likely that some young people who experience more significant mental health problems will require more targeted online support provided by a professional. Engaging young people with online interventions, however, remains a challenge and the findings of this study provide important clues for how best do this.

Professionally moderated peer networks might benefit from a more nuanced and tactful approach to engaging with young people online. They might also make use of some of the simple strategies for providing the affirmation that young people value. Given that young people have a strong investment in privacy and autonomy, interventions also need to respect their wish to choose when, with whom, and to what extent, they wish to engage (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). Regard for young people's agency may be particularly important in online spaces where young people are used to exercising their freedom without adult oversight or constraint.

While many online mental health interventions prioritise the provision of information, resources and coping strategies, there has been relatively less attention paid to the significance of relationships in their design (Bakker, Kazantzis, Rickwood, & Rickard, 2016). As young people may be more inclined to listen to a recommendation of a friend with whom they have an ongoing relationship than to respond to professional information on a website, it may be helpful to focus on educating peer networks to respond to distress and direct their friends towards professional online and offline supports where this is needed.

Internet interventions are increasingly exploring the use of algorithms to identify young people at risk so that they can direct targeted messages of support to them (De Choudhury, Gamon, Counts, & Horvitz, 2013). However, our research suggests that online expressions of distress can be subtle, indirect and hard to read out of context. Online

interventions may need to identify the more oblique signals of distress that young people use in online communication and, again, may explore the possibility of using peers to identify a person in distress on the basis of their prior knowledge of them.

However, while professional interventions may be useful for some young people, the reality is that peer relationships remain an important part of young people's support networks, and social media has become one of the most important sites for this. Online support has the potential to provide networks of support to young people that have implications for both their online and offline friendships. Mental health professionals who work with young people will often explore social support as a source of strength for clients, but need to also acknowledge the important role played by online friendship communities in terms of both how they impact on the development of offline friendships and as sources of support in and of themselves.

In terms of research methodology, this study also suggests the value of using online instant messaging interviews to gather data in this developing area (Author, 2019). The method generated rich data and was particularly effective in capturing the ways that young people communicate on social media (i.e. text speak, emojis and images).

There are a number of limitations to this research. The sample in this study was inevitably skewed towards those young people who might be most comfortable in online environments. There may be other young people who have different views of social media and even within the sample there was some variation in the extent to which participants valued online support. This group of participants is also relatively older and likely to be more experienced and competent to manage distress online than younger adolescents. Nonetheless, while this particular group of young people is unlikely to be representative of all those who use social media for a variety of different purposes, their accounts do illuminate ways in which social media might be used to provide support for young people experiencing distress.

### 4.1. Conclusion

There is great potential to reach young people in distress using social media, a mode of communication which is accessible, familiar and comfortable for many youth. However, if professionals are to engage young people through this medium, it is vital to recognise the priorities they have when engaging with online support. In particular, recognising the significance of trusting peer relationships as a prerequisite for young people's engagement with online support has far reaching implications for the development of interventions. This study highlights the value of asking young people about their preferences for support in order to ensure that resources are a better fit for their priorities (Gibson, Cartwright, Kerrisk, Campbell, & Seymour, 2016). It also draws attention to the particular expertise that young people have in engaging in online communication and suggests the benefit of including them as active partners in the co-design of online interventions (Thabrew et al., 2018).

### Conflict of interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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