

Vulnerable Young People and Their Experience of Online Risks

Aims

This paper is concerned with online risks to vulnerable young people. It aims: 1) To explore the digital lives of those who are vulnerable offline compared to those of young people with no difficulties, and 2) to identify the relationships between five types of vulnerability and four categories of online risk.

Key Findings

Not only could vulnerability predict online risk, but each vulnerability predicted particular risks. However the four types of risk were not individually predicted by all of the vulnerabilities. Each group of vulnerable young people, while more at risk online overall than their peers, is also liable to encounter particular categories of risk because of the specific vulnerabilities they have offline, coupled in some cases with age and gender, or being a victim of cyberbullying. Add to this other experiences of risk they encounter in the digital environment, which often in turn make it more likely they will encounter further risks. For example, the risk of viewing harmful Content can be predicted by an older teenager experiencing Cyberscams, Contact risks and being a victim of Cyberaggression. Those with SEN who also experience Content, Conduct and Cyberaggression risks are likely to also encounter Contact risks.

Online risk categories studied			
Contact	Content	Conduct	Cyberscams
High risk online relationships involving sexting and 7 reasons for doing so: Pressure, Blackmail, I was tricked into it, I was in a relationship and I wanted to share the picture, I was in a relationship and pressured to share a picture, Due to threats I shared it, I just tried it for fun.	9 items: Visiting or being exposed to websites: Urging you to be very thin, Talking about people self-harming or Trying to kill themselves, Promoting hatred or racist views, Giving dangerous advice, Selling illegal stuff. Nude pictures or videos you did not search for, Very violent pictures or videos you did not want to see.	4 items: Use of chat rooms or forums, Looking at pages meant for adults, Visiting online gambling sites, Downloading movies or music without paying.	5 items: I have had: My social media account hacked, Personal details stolen or hacked, Credit card details stolen and used, I've been tricked into paying money for something I did not want to buy, Tricked into buying fake goods.

Vulnerabilities studied				
Family Vulnerability	Communication Difficulties	Physical Disabilities	Special Educational Needs	Mental Health Difficulties
Young Carers And/or Children and young people in or leaving the care system.	'I need help with English', 'I have speech difficulties', 'I have hearing difficulties'.	'I have a physical disability', 'I have vision difficulties', 'I have a long standing illness'.	'I have learning difficulties', 'I have other forms of Special Educational Needs'.	'I have a mental health difficulty'.

Policy Context

This large scale study shows that while most young people are resilient and becoming digitally competent, the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people are moving in another direction that could disadvantage them even further or exacerbate their difficulties. It appears to be a new form of the 'digital divide' as the vulnerable young people diverge from the direction taken by their peers. It is essential to be competent and safe in a digital world, making questions about how we prepare young people for their digital future increasingly urgent. This study offers a glimpse into how intervention and support might develop to consider the whole child, especially those who are vulnerable offline. Those intervening might look into more than the presenting issue alone: known offline vulnerabilities should be flagged up. Support and advice about staying safe might address the young person's motivation or emotional need to take these risks rather than repeating generic rules. Staff and professional training could become more specialised and responsive because it is possible to predict the likelihood of particular risks.

Background

The Cybersurvey by Adrienne Katz of Youthworks is an annual survey now ten years old. It is regularly modernized but retains core measures to allow trends to be identified. Vulnerable groups have been identified and monitored for several years and are studied further in this paper via a research partnership with Dr Aiman El Asam of the University of Kingston.

Methodology

Responses were obtained from 2988 young people aged 10-16 from schools across Suffolk using an online questionnaire. Respondents were grouped based on vulnerability characterised by being in care or being a young carer, having special needs, a mental health difficulty, communication difficulties or physical disabilities. All were compared to non-vulnerable young people. Their online high risk experiences were categorised into online relationships (Contact), behaviour (Conduct), accessing high risk online material (Content) or being victims of Cyber-scams. Regression analysis looked at the association between vulnerability and online risks.

Source El Asam, A., & Katz, A. (2018). Vulnerable young people and their experience of online risks. *Human-Computer Interaction*, 33(4), 281-304. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07370024.2018.1437544>

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RH#132 has been produced by Adrienne Katz for the UKCCIS Evidence Group