

Young people's agency and entitlement to get help in anonymous online chat counselling services

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Abstract

In the study, we examined how anonymous online chat counselling services supported young people's agency. In particular, we investigated how the service responded to the young person's needs as an actor (purposes) and how the support of agency was built into the service-based solutions of the chat (elements of agency).

For this article, we analyzed 70 conversations between young people and adult online counsellors. The young people were aged between 18 and 24 years. For each conversation we summarized the core story and by content analysis identified the purposes for which the young person utilized the online chat counselling service, and the elements of agency involved in seeking help. We identified eight elements of agency, the most common of which were the young person's expertise, the timeliness of getting help, and the autonomy in accessing the service. Based on the co-occurrence of these elements, we construed six stories of agency reflecting young people's digital agency.

The research indicated that many young people perceived the anonymous online chat counselling service as a place where they had the opportunity to discuss issues they did not want to talk about in face-to-face services. Young people felt their concerns were valid and that they were entitled to receive help in the service. The study encourages adequate resourcing of anonymous online chat counselling services and the development of services where the digital world meets face-to-face services, as well as further exploration of the stories of young people whose agency is not realized in online chat counselling services.

Key Words: youth, online chat, digital services, mental health, agency