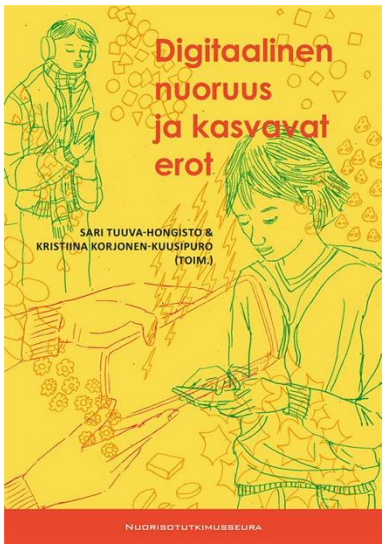

Janne Takala, Alix Helfer & Tuuli Pitkänen (2025). Nuoren toimijuus ja avunsaamisen oikeutus anonyymissä chat-palvelussa [Young people's agency and entitlement to get help in anonymous online chat counselling services. In Finnish]. In VilleSamuli Haverinen, Sari Tuuva-Hongisto Sari & Kristiina Korjonen-Kuusipuro Digitaalinen nuoruus ja kasvavat erot. Finnish Youth Research Society.

Young people's agency and entitlement to get help in anonymous online chat counselling services Janne Takala, Alix Helfer & Tuuli Pitkänen

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 held in January 2023 between young service users (YSU) and adult online counsellors. The YSUs were aged between 18 and 24 years. We made a summary of each converstation and by content analysis identified the purposes for which the YSU utilized the online chat counselling service, and the elements of agency involved in seeking help. The identified purposes for the service use were the following: to receive conversational support without need for face-to-face services or help (n = 57), counseling to seek help from other services (n = 18), additional assistance either alongside or between other face-to-face services (n = 20) and purpose not identified (n = 9).

We identified eight elements of agency. They were the following in ascending order of frequency: the YSUs expertise, the time of getting help, the autonomy in accessing the service, the encouragement for YSUs in their own way of articulation, the assistance for the YSUs in seeking help on their own terms, the choice of sharing one's thoughts with a professional instead of friends and family, respectful conversations in all topics including the ones YSU might feel risk of being disapproved or stigmatized and the anonymity preventing consequences the YSU does not want.

Based on the co-occurrence of these elements (purposes for using the chat and the elements of agency) we construed **six core stories of agency reflecting young people's digital agency**.

1. Expert in one's own life: YSU leads the conversation
2. Free discusser: Vague life topics feel suitable for the YSU in the service
3. A brave help seeker: YSU gets help in issues that don't fit other services
4. Claimant of additional support: YSU seeks additional help when other services are insufficient
5. Seeker of professional help: YSU chooses not to talk to friends and family
6. Not encountered YSU: No meaningful contact is established

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 services.

Table 1) Background Information

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

		n	%
Background information		70	100
Reported Age Group	18–19	28	40
	20–24	42	60
Reported Gender	Female	55	78,6
	Male	11	15,7
	Other	4	5,7
I feel. (emoticon with following definitions)	Positive	3	4,3
Asked before the chat conversation	Neutral	17	24,3
	Negative	50	71,4
Services used by the YSU mentioned in the chat conversation	Only chat	43	61,4
	At least one other service	27	38,6
How did we succceed in serving you?	Poor	6	8,6
(emoticon with following definition)	Ok	6	8,6
Asked after the chat conversation	Good	45	64,3
	Can`t tell, skip	13	18,6
	Mean	min	max
Minutes in queue	38,9	0	152
Lenght of the chat conversation in minutes	42,3	23	61
Number of messages by the YSU	28,2	15	66
Number of messages by the counsellor	24,9	7	78