

## **A systematic review exploring how young people use online forums for support around mental health issues**

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** Young people increasingly look towards the Internet for support. Online forums have been developed to provide mental health support, but they have received little attention in the research to date.

**Aims:** To summarise the existing literature examining how individuals use online forums to obtain support for mental health difficulties.

**Methods:** A systematic review of electronic databases was conducted to identify empirical literature in this area. The papers that met the inclusion criteria and satisfied quality assessment review were analysed for key themes.

**Results:** 21 papers were found. Three common themes in the papers were associated with opportunities of the technology: (1) *Providing stand alone or complementary informal support*, (2) *Providing informational, emotional and infomotional support*, and (3) *Making use of the specific practical opportunities afforded by forum technology*. A further three themes were associated with challenges: (1) *Managing the expectations of forum users*, (2) *Ensuring service user safety*, and (3) *Navigating the technical challenges associated with forums*.

**Conclusions:** The paper highlights the potential for individuals to access dynamic and responsive support within online forums. Additionally, it reflects upon the major areas that mental health professionals need to be aware of when entering into this arena.

**Keywords:** *online forums, young people, young adults, mental health, systematic review*

## **Introduction**

The mental health needs of young people and young adults are typically reported as very high (Deighton et al., 2019; Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford, & Goodman, 2005; Kessler et al., 2005; Kieling et al., 2011). Further, these needs are believed to have long term effects upon national economies, with 50% of mental health issues in later life being thought to develop before the age of 16 and 75% beyond the age of 18 (Belfer, 2008). In response to such figures, calls are commonly made for the development and extension of support services in this area (Department of Health, 2015; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007). These calls acknowledge the need for a broad range of support services, ranging from those that incorporate large communities, such as whole school (universal) interventions, to those that are more targeted towards specific individuals (Humphrey, 2013). To date, much of the typical response focuses upon face-to-face services, but there is a growing body of work focusing upon the development of technologically mediated mental health support. With these developments in mind, this paper focuses upon one strand of the technologically mediated support that has been developed for young people, notably online forums that focus upon issues related to mental health and emotional wellbeing.

### ***Online help seeking and support for young people***

In 2013 one survey reported that 82% of young people in the United Kingdom had sought out advice using the Internet (Youthnet, 2013). Further, this age group commonly report using the Internet as their first point of call when seeking help for difficulties (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Nicholas, Oliver, Lee, & O'Brien, 2004). Such a phenomenon is often linked to the changing world that children and young people are now growing up in, with this age group being described as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), notably people who have grown up in a world that has always had the Internet, and viewed as having 'hybrid lives' that straddle both the virtual and physical

world (Youthnet, 2013). Such large numbers of individuals seeking support online reflects the 'technological turn' (Hanley, 2017) that mental health support services are going through within industrialised countries.

There are numerous ways that individuals access support over the Internet. This includes using stand-alone websites for obtaining information and engaging directly with others. When young individuals do contact others, text based resources are often the most popular (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006), with these resources providing a level of perceived privacy that is not attainable using other means such as videoconferencing. Text based support for mental health difficulties includes email exchanges (asynchronous communication), those using synchronous chat facilities (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017), and engaging with online forums (Pattison, Hanley, Pykhtina, & Ersahin, 2015). As such, support can vary in whether it is offered by peers, professionals or a combination of the both.

Online forums (also known as message boards) are spaces in which individuals can take part in discussions around a wide array of topics. Unlike chat communications, the messages that are posted in forums are often longer and archived for a period of time. Forum members are then open to respond to the previous content as they see fit. Whilst many forums are free from any moderation, due to the potential for people to be offended by the comments that are posted, some spaces are moderated by designated others (e.g. Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi, 2018; Salmon, 2000). The topics that forums focus upon are incredibly varied. They range from those that are generic and socially orientated, to those that are more specific and directed towards particular issues/topics - as indicated earlier, here we are specifically interested in those forums that focus upon issues related to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Despite online forums being a popular means for young people to engage with

others, little has been written about the benefits that young people themselves perceive in such engagement.

### ***Rationale***

Given the developments within technologically mediated support for young people, this paper works to synthesise the literature related to a fragment of this territory. Specifically, the interest here is upon the perceptions of the support that young people and young adults receive when using online forums. This research was therefore informed by the following exploratory question:

*What empirical research has been conducted investigating the way that young people and young adults utilise online forums focusing upon mental health issues?*

This then focuses upon two associated sub questions to provide direction for the overall study:

*What are the key characteristics of this body of literature?*

*What are the opportunities and challenges for professionals who work in this media?*

### **Methodology**

A systematic review (Hanley & Cutts, 2013) of the research literature was conducted to examine the way that young people and young adults use online forums for mental health support. This process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. This protocol was not published on Prospero in advance of the search.

### ***The Research Team***

As this review is qualitative in nature it follows good practice guidelines for this type of work (e.g. Levitt et al., 2018). With this in mind, a brief statement about the authors' prior knowledge of the topic is provided here.

The lead author of the paper (TH) is a practising counselling psychologist who has been involved in developing and researching online mental health services for young people for approximately 15 years. The second author (JP) is a Chartered psychologist and has been an active researcher for 18 years. JP has published work focusing upon the use of technology in mental health services. The third author (KUG) worked as a research assistant on the project whilst completing her PhD in Psychology.

### ***Search Procedures***

Initial searches were conducted the third author (KUG). The library search facility used included *ProQuest Psychology Journal; PsychArticles; Child Development and Adolescent Studies; Directory of Open Access Journal (DOAJ); High Wire Press; Medline; ProQuest Central; Public Library and Science Journal (PLoS); PubMed Central; Science Direct) and the Scopus database*. Further the online reference list created by Professor Azy Barak was also reviewed by KUG for relevant articles <http://azy.edu.haifa.ac.il/references>. The initial search was limited to scholarly and peer reviewed journal articles for the time period of 01/1999 – 02/2016 (only those articles where the full text was available were included in the analysis). The search was run again in 10/2017 to identify any additional studies published in the time period following the initial searches. The following keywords were searched: “young people”, “young adults”, “adolescen\*”, and “youth” combined with "online counselling”, as well as with “internet counselling“, "online mental health service", "online therapy“, “online forums”, “online support service”, “(a)synchronous computer-mediated communication”, "mental health" "online chat", and "distance counselling".

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

All of the retrieved studies were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria in Table 1. Studies were included with a population aged 11-25 discussing mental health related issues using text-based asynchronous forum interactions. Further, only studies linked to an organisation were included so as to only reflect upon those that have some professional oversight. Considering less structured forums was viewed as being out of the scope of the current study and less relevant to the work of professionals who work with young people. The review considered only published, peer-reviewed, primary research studies written in English. Any study design was considered for inclusion that reported outcome and process evaluations, or young people's experiences of therapeutic interchanges.

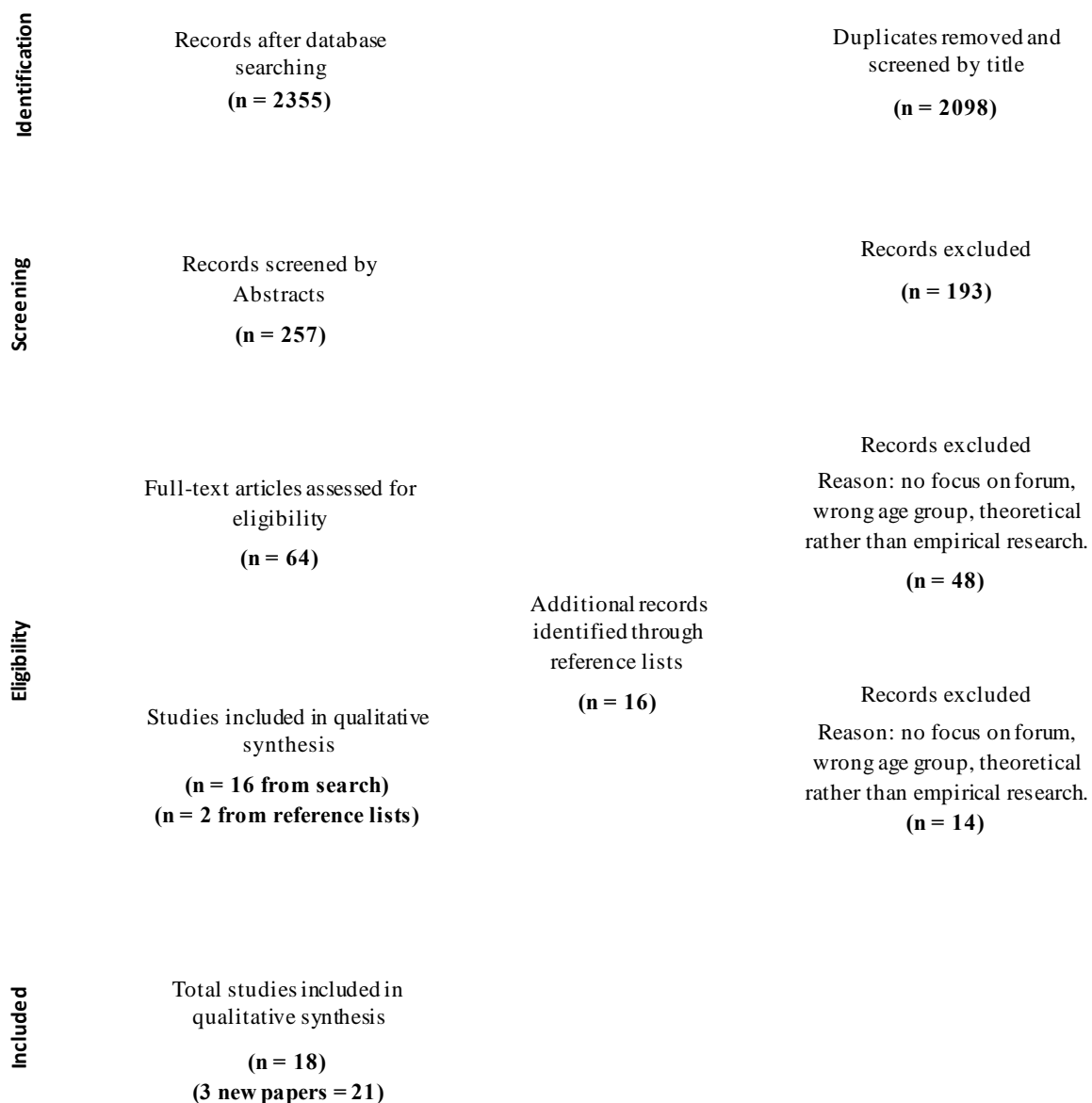
**Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Parameters	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Participants aged between 11-25</li><li>● Participants discussing commonplace issue related to mental health</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Participants aged below 11 or 26 and above</li></ul>
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Focuses upon text-based asynchronous forum interactions (linked to an organisation)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Other forms of online communication (chat rooms, email)</li></ul>
Study Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Peer-reviewed, primary research studies.</li><li>● Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Theoretical papers, editorials, commentaries, book chapters, dissertations or thesis, and grey literature.</li></ul>
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Studies that report outcome evaluations examining the impact of therapeutic interchanges using asynchronous forums</li><li>● Studies that report process evaluations examining how or why an intervention did or did not work.</li><li>● Studies that report young people's experiences of therapeutic interchanges using asynchronous forums</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Studies that do not focus upon evaluating the impact, exploring the process of, and individual experiences of using asynchronous forums for therapeutic benefit</li></ul>
Publication Status	Published studies.	Unpublished studies as they may well be of lower methodological quality
Country of Origin	Studies conducted in any country are eligible.	
Language	English language	Not English language.



The database searches by KUG generated a total of 2355 articles and these were examined at various levels of scrutiny. Following the removal of the duplicates and screening the articles by title, 257 references were selected. Further work involved the screening of the abstracts by KUG and JP independently and disagreements were settled through discussion with TH. This resulted in the exclusion of a further 193 references, leaving the researchers with 64 records. KUG and JP read the full text of these articles independently. Differences in their results were once again reviewed and discussed with TH until an agreement was arrived at. Based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria, 16 articles were selected. 48 papers were eliminated as they did not have a primary focus upon forums, explored the wrong age group, or were not empirical research. An additional 16 potential articles were identified through reference lists by KUG. Further review of these papers by KUG and JP resulted in the exclusion of 14 of these as, once again, they did not fully meet the inclusion criteria. Updating the database search in the final phase resulted in the inclusion of an additional three studies published in 2017. All three of these papers were judged to meet the inclusion criteria for the project. All three authors agreed upon the articles to be included in the following stages of the project. See Figure 1 for a PRISMA summary of the filtering process.

**Insert Figure 1:** *PRISMA flow diagram of the article search process in the systematic review of the literature.*



**Figure 1:** PRISMA flow diagram of the article search process in the systematic review of the literature.

### **Quality Criteria and Assessment**

Once the final selection of studies had been settled upon, these were examined for their overall quality. This was completed by reviewing each paper alongside the quality assessment protocols outlined by National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2012: now National Institute for Health and Care Excellence). Six areas are

considered in this framework (1) reporting of a study's aim, (2) the research design, (3) the recruitment and data collection, (4) the data analysis processes, (5) the findings and interpretations, and (6) the implications for the work. The papers were collaboratively assessed by two of the authors (KUG and JP) and reviewed by the third (TH). Consensus was reached that all the papers reaching this stage should be included, with them all meeting the required criteria.

### ***Data Synthesis***

For the purposes of this study, only the abstracts, findings and discussion components of the selected studies were used in the analysis phase. A process of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) which followed the six stages of thematic analysis articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify and develop themes. The three additional papers that were included during the second search period (9, 11, 13) were used to test the coherence of the analysis (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). This process involved considering whether additional themes or new perspectives might be added by the inclusion of these studies. Although these extended the depth of the nuances within the major themes, they did extend the major themes themselves.

### **Findings**

This section outlines the key findings from the review process. Initially the key characteristics of the studies that have been included in the analysis are briefly discussed before moving to outline the opportunities and challenges for professionals working with young people in this media. Illustrative quotes, primarily from the qualitative papers, are provided from the papers to provide the reader with a sense of the key themes that were identified in these areas.

### *Characteristics of the Included Studies*

Table 2 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the studies that have been included in this review. Specifically, this table outlines the authors' names and the year that the paper was published, the primary aim and focus of the work, the population/sample involved in it and the research design adopted. These papers are listed in alphabetical order and numbered, the numbers being referred to in parenthesis in the sections that follow.

The final selection of studies is diverse and includes work focusing upon mental health services that have been tailored for particular populations (e.g. Asian males, higher education students, carer communities and those wanting to discuss issues around sexuality) with specific primary presenting issues (e.g. self harm, suicide ideation, depression, distress, romantic relationship breakup and transition). Additionally, it is noteworthy that a number of the papers focus upon providing support for specific physical health conditions (diabetes, cancer and cystic fibrosis). Such divisions demonstrate the potential for online forums to bring together groups of people that are separated by geographical, psychological or physical barriers. This observation resonates with the concept of the 'globalised local cultures' (Massey & Jess, 1995) afforded through computer mediated relationships. Thus, individuals can potentially use these forums as a means of connecting with like-minded individuals, or those encountering similar life situations. Mental health professionals might therefore see such resources as a means of providing support for students who have specific difficulties that are uncommon in the local vicinity.

The papers commonly outlined how forum users engage with the platform, what they discuss, how they interact with peers or with professionals online, as well as how they benefit from these services. A majority of the papers principally focused upon the way in which individuals interact in online forums (focusing upon the process of forum communication). Outcomes were also considered, but researchers often had to adopt creative means, such as

adopting sophisticated mixed methods strategies to try to capture meaningful information.

The challenge of adapting research methodologies to fit the media is reported in other formats of online mental health provision, for example when attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of online humanistic counselling (Sefi & Hanley, 2012), and might be contrasted to work in other delivery modes in which outcomes studies are conducted in a more traditional manner.

**Table 2:** Characteristics of included studies

Number	Author (year)	Primary Aim and focus	Population/Sample	Design
1	Barak & Dolev-Cohen (2006)	<b>Aim:</b> To examine how moderator involvement might affect participants' emotional relief – specifically the degree of active involvement. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	20 suicidal and severely distressed adolescents: 15 girls, 5 boys	Mixed-methods
2	Chang, Yeh, & Krumboltz (2001)	<b>Aim:</b> To explore the process, outcome, and utilisation patterns of an online support group. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	32 Asian American male undergrad college students, age 18-22.	Mixed-methods
3	Elwell, Grogan, & Coulson (2011)	<b>Aim:</b> To investigate the types of social support provided. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	151 adolescents with cancer (151 usernames were identified)	Qualitative
4	Greidanus & Everall (2010)	<b>Aim:</b> This study examines an online community formed to provide support for distressed adolescents. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	10 adolescents experiencing suicidal thoughts (Based on language use - 10 main authors, 8 females, 2 males. Exact number of members could not be determined due to anonymity clause).	Qualitative
5	Hanckel & Morris (2014)	<b>Aim:</b> This study examines how queer young people in Australia are engaging in an online community to address their marginalisation and oppression. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	14 participants – age 15 – 21.	Mixed-methods
6	Horgan, McCarthy, & Sweeney (2013)	<b>Aim:</b> To develop and pilot test an online peer support intervention. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	117 self-reported depressive symptoms, age 18-24.	Mixed-methods

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Number	Author (year)	Primary Aim and focus	Population/Sample	Design
7	Johnson, Ravert, & Everton (2001)	<b>Aim:</b> To create a web-based support service and to measure its effects. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	18 teenagers with cystic fibrosis (CF), age 13-18.	Mixed methods
8	Jones et al.(2011)	<b>Aim:</b> To explore what young people think about online self-harm discussion forums. <b>Focus:</b> Outcome	77 young people with self-harm issues, age 16-25 18 professionals and final-year students in health and social care disciplines	Mixed-methods
9	Kendal, Kirk, Elvey, Catchpole, & Pryjmachuk (2017)	<b>Aim:</b> This study explores how young people used a youth-orientated, moderated, online, eating dis-orders discussion forum, run by an eating disorders charity <b>Focus:</b> Process, outcomes	Young people with eating disorder (age and # of Ps unknown) 119 unique usernames	Qualitative
10	Love et al. (2012)	<b>Aim:</b> To explore how adolescents and young adults (AYAs) use an online support group to meet their psychosocial needs. <b>Focus:</b> Process	Young adults with cancer (350 randomly sampled posts - # of Ps unknown).	Qualitative
11	McKiernan, Ryan, McMahon, & Butler (2017)	<b>Aim:</b> To examine the ways in which young people interact with each other on an Internet-mediated discussion forum and to ascertain the function of the interactions. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	31 forum users with experience of romantic relationship breakup. 10 moderators.	Qualitative

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Number	Author (year)	Primary Aim and focus	Population/Sample	Design
12*	Owens et al. (2015)	<b>Aim:</b> To bring young people together with health professionals online to see how well they could communicate. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	77 people with experience of self-harm, age 16-25. 18 recently/nearly qualified health professionals.	Mixed methods
13	Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi (2017)	<b>Aim:</b> To gain an understanding of how young people use an online forum for emotional and mental health issues. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	Adolescents and young adults with emotional and mental health issues – age 11-25. (Exact # of Ps unknown due to anonymity, but 160 unique posts).	Qualitative
14	Ravert, Hancock, & Ingersoll (2004)	<b>Aim:</b> Nature of messages posted; differences messages posted by subgroups; how will messages posted for health professionals differ from those posted for peers in public discussion forums? <b>Focus:</b> Process	340 adolescents with diabetes.	Mixed methods
15	Richards & Tangney (2008)	<b>Aim:</b> Develop an informal online learning community for mental health support and education. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	389 university students.	Mixed methods
16	Skinner (2010)	<b>Aim:</b> Is online discussion a useful way to help international students deal with issues of emotional well-being during a unique period of transition in their lives? <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	55 international students from China, Poland, and Italy coming to study in the UK at university level, age 18-35.	Mixed-methods



(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Number	Author (year)	Primary Aim and focus	Population/Sample	Design
17*	Smithson et al. (2011a)	<b>Aim:</b> How young adults became members and sustained membership in an online support forum. To understand how young people who self-harm might provide support to each other online, and how health and social care professionals might work with young people in an online environment. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	77 young people, SharpTalk website members.	Qualitative
18*	Smithson et al. (2011b)	<b>Aim:</b> Nature of problem presentation and responses on an online forum; the potential of online communities to foster engagement and shared learning between NHS professionals and young people. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	Young people with self-harm (# of Ps unknown).	Qualitative
19	Suzuki & Calzo (2004)	<b>Aim:</b> A snapshot investigation of a popular health support website - discussion of adolescent health and social issues. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	Adolescents, college aged or younger (# of Ps unknown – snapshot of a bulletin board).	Qualitative
20	Trondsen & Tjora (2014)	<b>Aim:</b> To explore the impact of a self-help group on adolescents with a ‘mentally ill parent’. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	13 Female adolescents who used the self-help group – 15-18 year olds.	Qualitative

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Number	Author (year)	Primary Aim and focus	Population/Sample	Design
21	Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode (2006)	<b>Aim:</b> How adolescents solicit and share information related to self-injurious behaviour: the prevalence and nature of message boards, their users, and most commonly discussed topics; the correlations between content areas raised for discussion; the role of message boards in spreading information and influencing help-seeking behaviour. <b>Focus:</b> Process, Outcome	Adolescents – mostly females, age 12-20 (# of Ps unknown).	Qualitative

\*highlights reports of the same project – SharpTalk

Process = Study that focuses upon the interactions between members of the group

Outcome = Study with an evaluative component

## ***Opportunities for Professionals***

Three key themes associated with the opportunities for professionals were identified: (1) *Providing stand alone or complementary informal support*, (2) *Providing informational, emotional and infomotional support*, and (3) *Making use of the specific practical opportunities afforded by forum technology*.

### *Providing stand alone or complementary informal support*

Paper 20: “It made it possible for me to ask for help at school. Yes, because I knew I had to talk to someone, but it was as though through the forum I became absolutely certain about that” (Trondsen & Tjora, 2014, p. 1413).

The first theme that is important to highlight is that forums provided the opportunity for young people to obtain a variety of types of support. Forums can be anonymous and accessed *instead* of face-to-face professional support (all studies discussed the *stand alone* nature of forum support to some degree) or they can provide support that directly *complements* face-to-face work with professionals within an informal setting [2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18]. The professional support discussed included input that was directly offered by professionals (e.g. counsellors [13], educators [15], or health professionals [12]) and that which was only discussed as an adjunct to the forums. These findings demonstrate that forums are used in a variety of ways to obtain support and that there are a range of ways in which more formal support mechanisms are accessed (discussed below). It is also evident that the anonymous nature of many forums proves a fundamental strength to this technology for some individuals, with young people reporting that they prefer to talk online and feel less judged in this media [e.g. 2, 4, 5, 15, 17, 21].

### *Providing informational, emotional and infomotional support*

Paper 3: “I’m 13 and a four year cancer survivor! I just wanted to let you know that if you need to talk I would love to hear from you!” (Elwell, Grogan, & Coulson, 2011, p. 242).

The next major opportunity evident within the papers is the variety of responses that supporters provide. Here we identify three specific nuances and discuss these in turn.

- *Informational Support*

Young people receive information from other forum users. Forums can be a place for obtaining information [5, 6, 8, 11, 13, 17, 20], engaging in educational activities and learning [4, 8, 13,14], sharing resources and networking [7, 8], and discussing cultural issues [11, 19].

- *Emotional Support*

In addition to informational support, individuals also reported receiving emotional support through their interactions in forums. Individuals explicitly reported forums to be a place for support and involvement [1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21], to obtain peer support [2, 4, 7, 10, 14, 16, 17, 19], to make friends [3, 4, 7, 10, 16], to help them cope better, and to share feelings [3, 4, 10, 19]. Such engagement led to empathic engagement [18], fostered therapeutic change [2], and helped groups to reach their potential [2].

- *Infomotional support*

The final type of support evident in the papers reflected the interaction between informational and emotional support. Here the receipt of information was seen to contribute to the emotional wellbeing of the individual. The term *infomotional support*, a term reflecting the informative and emotional elements of the interactions, might be used to understand this

relational concept. This can be explicitly seen in the processes of normalisation [5, 10] and belonging [4, 5, 6, 10, 17, 18, 21] that individuals reported.

### *Making use of the practical opportunities afforded by forums*

Paper 15: Online forums are... “Really fantastic for those such as myself who find it extremely difficult to spontaneously articulate feelings. It is much easier in writing, and seeing the entries of others is heartening” (Richards & Tangney, 2008, p. 90).

The third opportunity summarises the specific benefits of the media itself. Here the papers outline how forums can be accessible and affordable [2, 4, 6, 17], provide a safe and comfortable environment [4, 5, 10, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21], and is not location specific [7]. As such, it is noted that forums can help reach individuals who are typically reluctant to access services [2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21] and can act as a resource for developing interventions [21]. Further, the anonymous nature of the services (see earlier) means that people can approach them without concern for the stigma often associated with accessing mental health services [15].

### *Challenges for professionals*

Three themes associated with the challenges are highlighted: (1) *Managing the expectations of forum users*, (2) *Ensuring service user safety*, and (3) *Navigating the technical challenges associated with forums*.

#### *Managing the expectations of forum users*

Paper 17: “To begin with I found all the forums comforting but then I began to feel like an outsider as everyone knew each other and didn’t seem to have time for the newbies...” (Smithson et al., 2011, pp. 1572–1573).

When considering the challenges associated with the support in mental health forums for young people, managing the service users expectations proves a major consideration. This process can be quite wide ranging and commonly involves helping new service users (newbies) orientate to the environment as new environment [17]. Managing these expectations early on appears important for any relationships that may follow. For instance, if a service user finds that their post has been reallocated in a forum this may cause some undue concern [12]. Further, users should also be informed about the amount of professional support they may receive [3, 12, 14] and the limits to the confidentiality within the website [15, 17, 21]. Miscommunication around this can lead to mistrust and annoyance with the service.

### *Ensuring service user safety*

Paper 21: “I’ve found that if you press your blade against the skin at the depth you want to be and draw really fast it doesn’t hurt and there is blood galore. Be careful though, ‘cause you can go very deep without meaning too” (Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006, p. 7).

The second theme follows on from the first and relates to maintaining service user safety. Where expectations are not managed, or there are mismatching expectations, the potential for individuals to be at risk can occur. This can take the following forms, people

might receive unexpected [3] or unreliable information [14], receive inconsistent support [5], and see unhelpful messages get normalised [1, 6, 18, 21] with individuals having to potentially process them without support [3, 6, 17, 18, 21]. Additionally, as is noted in the previous section, some individuals might struggle to understand the limits to confidentiality that a forum has (for instance, professional services do not commonly guarantee everything will remain confidential but this may not be understood).

### *Navigating the technical challenges of forums*

Paper 6: When considering the attrition in the service usage being studied, the paper's authors noted, "To keep an online thread going takes time and commitment.... Starting new threads and posting articles of interest is needed to keep the interest of participants" (Horgan, McCarthy, & Sweeney, 2013, p. 88).

As with the opportunities, there were a number of distinct technical challenges associated with obtaining support through forums. These included generic technical problems, such as designing and monitoring the website [3, 4, 17] alongside more nuanced issues. In relation to the latter, it is noted that forum providers would benefit from being proactive and keeping the content up-to-date (e.g. by posting new threads/content on the forum) [6, 7] and that there are specific ethical issues for professionals to consider (e.g. issues related to data protection) [15, 21].

Given the potential pitfalls that have been outlined in this section, and those above, service developers might want to consider the use of moderators on the website. These can be greatly valued [3] and help manage expectations, provide a safety net for users and mediate technological difficulties.

## **Discussion**

This review aimed to provide a summary of the research investigating the way that young people and young adults utilise online forums for support around mental health issues. As is evident from the findings, these resources can provide a dynamic and flexible resource for individuals to obtain support. In contrast, they also have the potential to be unsafe and lacking in scaffolding from professionals. The opportunities and challenges that are related to such issues are discussed in turn below.

### ***Considering the opportunities of online forums***

The synthesis of the literature regarding the way that young people use forums paints a rich and diverse picture. In contrast to the negative reports of online forums, in which people either attempt to *escape* from relating (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003) or use forums to promote behaviours that may be viewed as harmful (such as ‘proana’ forums (e.g. Tong, Heinemann-LaFave, Jeon, Kolodziej-Smith, & Warshay, 2013)), the mental health forums examined here appear to provide pragmatic resources for young people to access a wide variety of support. Unsurprisingly, as with other forum research, they are viewed as useful and provide service users with informational and emotional support (Coulson, 2005). A more novel finding is that there is clear interaction between the two phenomena, with the information provided contributing to the emotional dimension and vice versa. Such *infomotional* interactions have the potential to aid the development of positive relational dynamics between group members and help to develop enhanced feelings of belongingness. Given the common reports of isolation within some of the online communities, such a process can be invaluable in connecting people into supportive communities that they would not otherwise have access to.



The type of support that individuals obtain in forums varies in nature. As is evident from the papers here, this might include support from professionals and peers, and range from relationships that are solely online to those that complement other services (face-to-face, telephone etc.). Reassuringly, a number of the young users reflected in these papers appear to be both informed about the nature of the support they are accessing and discerning in their use of them. This is evident in several papers in which young users described seeking out online support explicitly because of its perceived benefits (see practical opportunities afforded by online forums above). Such findings correspond with the literature which focuses upon the informed help seeking behaviours of young people (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007) and the way that young people are often experts in their own right about the technologies being used to support mental health difficulties (Hanley, 2012).

Given the opportunities that are afforded by forum technologies, it is important for mental health professionals not to dismiss such resources and to take the support given in this environment seriously. Further, although the resources might be solely provided by peer users, professionals should also be aware that forums can still provide a rich, diverse and responsive resource to individuals who might find it difficult to access support through other means.

### ***Considering the challenges online forums***

Online forums provide an interesting twist on traditional mental health support. They provide 'bottom up' support for service users that can prove attractive to some individuals (Ali, Farrer, Gulliver, & Griffiths, 2015). Although there is much scope for positive support, as outlined above there are numerous challenges associated with forum based mental health support. Although many professionals will not be engaged in directly developing online support, being mindful of such issues can be essential in judging whether to refer an

individual to a resource. Additionally, such issues may also prove useful for consideration in online awareness or safeguarding programmes targeted at students. Professionals working with school age children are therefore encouraged to proactively inform themselves about the nuances of this media and remain cautious of this relatively unboundaried and unregulated environment.

The service providers within the work summarised in this study attempt to overcome some of the challenges through two major means: (1) the induction of service users to the forums spaces, and (2) the use of forum moderators. These are discussed briefly in turn below.

Many services attempt to manage the expectations of service users by providing information online about what they offer (an induction or orientation). Such a process might be viewed akin to the processes that therapists might use to inform individuals about their services (e.g. Sills, 2006). In the papers reviewed here, services attempted to achieve this by adopting techniques such as providing information pages about the services they provided (these included a discussion strand specifically to talk about issues related to the forum), including case study examples of how people might use the websites, and training up peer moderators. Such interventions aim to inform service users of any risks associated with the websites and are in keeping with the self-directed nature of forums. They are thus relatively unobtrusive in their presence. Commonly these inductions do not reflect upon how individuals may communicate in such environments. Content supporting service users to communicate in more non-directive ways, as discussed in Prescott et al. (2017), may however prove helpful in mediating advice that might be more opinionated in nature. Advocating such communication strategies extend beyond online forums but might have a magnified currency in environments where communication can be tainted by disinhibition (Suler, 2004).

Having moderators available on forums becomes a much larger commitment for those running them. These individuals can support service users to engage with the service and help protect them from uninformed advice. The format of such moderation varies, including those that are self-moderated by service users, those that are moderated by trained peer supporters, and those that are overseen by professionals. The variance reflects the huge variety of forums available, but also highlights that moderation is in itself a skilled role (Prescott et al., 2018) and one not to be taken lightly. Arguably, although not exclusively, forums that have higher levels of oversight by skilled moderators are safer and more likely to provide fruitful facilitative environments for the individuals who use the services. Where moderators are involved, it is recommended that they proactively engage in overseeing forum posts so that there is less chance of posts being unexpected by users, providing unreliable information and, at worst, providing information that may put someone at risk. Some downsides to such oversight however are (1) that the process of moderating such posts might slow down any engagement, (2) be perceived as censorship by authors whose views are bounced back, edited or removed, (3) prove costly to manage due to the time requirements, and (4) remove the autonomous and organic nature of forums that can prove appealing to some individuals.

Ultimately forums appear to walk a line in which there is a trade off between professional oversight and involvement and the autonomy of young service users. Given the exploratory nature of adolescence (Coleman, 2011) it would seem inappropriate to attempt censor those services that receive little moderation or are not moderated at all. Further, it is important to acknowledge that this would not be completely possible and would likely lead to the development of services that are harder to find. Professionals can however be involved in supporting the development of resources that do have additional scaffolding and thus provide some safeguards for young users of forums. Additionally, they can be involved in providing support to young people themselves by informing them about the challenges and

opportunities associated with forums. As indicated above, many young people are already informed online service users and will often choose to use those resources that have developed good reputations (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2016; Hanley, 2012), it is our view however that mental health professionals can still play an important part in supporting individuals in making their decisions however.

### ***Reflexive Discussion***

As noted in the methodology section, the authors of the paper come to this piece with a good awareness of the broad territory of online mental health. As such many of the points above appear understandable and in keeping with what has been written before about this territory. The dynamic way that the online forums evolved to support the mental health needs of young people did however prove different than expected at times. For instance, many of the forums organically adapted to the needs of the communities in slightly surprising ways – a discussion about self-harming behaviour might be interspersed (concurrently or sequentially) with conversations about music, or a practical conversation about a health condition might become much more emotionally focused. In a time when psychological support leans towards more manualised and standardised approaches, the responsive nature of the forum spaces in these papers appeared refreshing, if potentially anxiety producing for professionals. The young users, in their diverse and creative use of technology, therefore helped to remind us of the need for mental health support to respect the whole human behind the screen. Echoing some of these sentiments, one professional involved in a trial project included in the review noted:

“I think it’s a unique experience (especially for a doctor) to talk to young people who self-harm in a more informal situation, hear what they say and be able to adjust your own practice. [...] I think it would be a valuable part of training for medics and other professionals” (Owens et al., 2015, p. 89).

### ***Strengths, limitations and future research***

This paper provides a thorough review of the existing literature focusing upon how young people and young adults use online forums for support around mental health issues. The review will hopefully prove informative for professionals that might encounter young people engaging with such resources (educational professionals, social workers, therapists, psychologists etc.) and those that are involved in designing such resources. In particular, as noted above, the synthesis reported here provides a reflection upon the importance of moderation in creating an environment that is appropriately bounded for young people to utilise safely. Further, it emphasises the potential for forum managers to ‘induct’ individuals into ways of communicating that are more facilitative in nature. In reviewing existing forum resources it is notable that resources engage in such induction activities by providing descriptions of the resources, case studies of people who have used them and even forum spaces themselves for individuals to discuss and gain information. Such material might help orientate individuals to the resources and prevent young people from receiving surprising or incorrect information.

In contrast to the strengths of the work, it is notable that there were numerous papers investigating how young people use forums for support around issues to do with mental health that have not been included in this review. In exploring empirical research looking at resources set up specifically for this purpose, it omits the literature that is less systematic in nature (e.g. commentaries and observations) and those resources that have more organically emerged (and do not have professional oversight). These might reflect naturally occurring resources that can be perceived as both negative (e.g. proana forums) and positive (those that encourage young people to engage in fun thoughtful conversations that will enhance wellbeing). Such an omission provides a specific slant to the findings and would be something to consider in any further work going forward. Additionally, it is also notable that

many studies aim to explore the specific dynamics of the relationships online. Although these clearly provide valuable insights into the inner workings of such groups, developing work that takes a more systematic evaluative approach, which is appropriately tailored to these environments, might therefore prove beneficial for the continued growth and development of online forums.

Finally, as this is an area in which research is still relatively nascent, it is notable that there is presently only a limited amount of research available focusing upon this topic. Further, papers appear to be emerging at regular frequency, a factor that might reflect the acknowledgement that such resources have much potential. In accounting for this, this paper hopefully provides a useful contemporary summary for researchers and professionals who encounter these environments in their everyday work.

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