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## research article

# Developmental needs of adolescents in the online lifeworld in the context of youth work

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The online lifeworld gives adolescents various opportunities to meet their developmental needs. Not all young people benefit from these opportunities. They encounter negative experiences, have difficulties fulfilling their needs and engage in risky and harmful behaviours in the online lifeworld. This poses challenges for Dutch youth work professionals, as little is known about the digital lives of Dutch adolescents and the challenges they encounter when meeting their developmental needs in the online lifeworld. In this qualitative study, a photovoice method was used to collect screenshots from adolescents ( $N = 175$ ) concerning their experiences and needs in the online lifeworld. Six types of developmental needs in the online lifeworld were distinguished. The article concludes that understanding how adolescents use online affordances to fulfil their developmental needs is a starting point for all youth work professionals in providing adequate support to adolescents in the online lifeworld.

**Key words** youth work • online lifeworld • adolescents • developmental needs • online affordances

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## Introduction

Through social media and various digital platforms and tools, adolescents do their homework, communicate with peers, parents and family, spend meaningful leisure time, play online games with peers, shop, explore their identity, gain new experiences

and friendships, build relations, and so on. Most young people benefit from these online possibilities: their cognitive and social skills increase, and their friendships and self-confidence are boosted (Apolaza et al, 2013; Koutamanis et al, 2013; Vossen and Valkenburg, 2016). However, the online environment also entails some risks for adolescents' development. Some adolescents are victims of online identity theft, become lonely and isolated, develop social media or gaming addictions, or are cyberbullied, exposed, groomed, catfished and so on. Earlier studies have shown that the vulnerabilities of adolescents in the offline social environment tend to transfer into their online lifeworld (Carrick-Davies, 2011; Odgers and Jensen, 2019). Adolescents with problems in their psychosocial and cognitive development, and with poor social networks and support from their family, school and communities, are at risk of negative experiences in the online lifeworld (Ronde, 2011; Valkenburg, 2014). At the same time, other scholars (Livingstone and Haddon, 2012) add that adolescents who do not have explicit offline vulnerabilities can also have negative online experiences and difficulties meeting their needs and coping with problems in the online lifeworld. They engage in potentially harmful online activities and behaviour, for example, chatting with strangers or participating in dangerous online challenges.

In the Netherlands, professional youth work aims to strengthen the personal development and social participation of young people (Metz, 2011). The starting point of professional youth work is always the lifeworld of young people (Metz, 2011) and their experiences, needs and interests (Batsleer and Davies, 2010; McGregor, 2015). Now – and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic – the Internet and social media have become a substantial part of young people's lives. However, many Dutch youth workers still have insufficient insight into the online lifeworld of young people and its influence on their personal and social development (Hamdiui and Van Den Broek, 2019). This poses a challenge for youth work professionals to understand in what situations and with what aims to provide what type support to adolescents in need. Most previous studies on the development of adolescents in an online context are focused on four broad domains: identity, autonomy, (peer) relationships (see, for example, Valkenburg, 2014; Granic et al, 2020; Nesi et al, 2020) and online risks and opportunities (see, for example, Livingstone et al, 2011; Šmahel et al, 2014). From the perspective of youth work, the literature lacks qualitative studies that explore adolescents' points of view about their daily lives, struggles and successes in the online lifeworld. The adolescents' perspective brings another dimension to the common success stories and predominant risks (Kaulingfreks, 2019) in the online lifeworld. Additionally, young people are often at the forefront of using social media and technology, and their insights can provide innovative perspectives on issues affecting them in the digital environment. Without these insights, youth work support will stay one-sided and not attuned to the lifeworld of adolescents and their own way of online interaction with peers, adults and digital tools. With this in mind, the central research question of this study is: what challenges are Dutch adolescents faced with in the online lifeworld when tackling their developmental needs?

## Adolescents' development in the online lifeworld

Generally speaking, young people in Western societies are facing three distinct developmental tasks during adolescence: autonomy, identity development and peer (intimate) relationships (Greenfield and Yan, 2006; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017;

Nesi et al, 2020). Early adolescents (10–15 years old) belong to groups of friends and seek interactions with peers and their approval, as well as information about, and affirmation of, aspects of their identity through friends, idols or heroes in the online lifeworld (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). When they develop into late adolescents (16–19 years old), their sense of autonomy and control increases, and their preferences in the online lifeworld become more mature. They are less concerned with meeting as many friends as possible than with deepening friendships and entering into (sexual) relationships (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). Young adults (20–23 years old) are establishing autonomy and independency in this stage of their psychosocial development, forming their identity and committing to certain views, values, beliefs, likes and dislikes. They engage in more serious and long-term intimate relationships, and pursue their studies or professional career (Havighurst, 1972).

The online lifeworld is more than just a medium for communication. It is an environment that shapes young people's daily activities and gives them both a sense of belonging and a territory for validating their identities, making friendships and connections, and developing intimacy with peers (Morimoto and Friedland, 2011; Melvin, 2018). It gives young people an arena for fulfilling the developmental tasks and meeting their developmental needs by constructing and co-constructing their social environment, using their own sets of rules and norms, and creating their own digital places where they interact and share experiences, feelings and memories with peers, adults and digital tools (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011; Melvin, 2018; Nesi et al, 2020). These interactions within the online lifeworld fundamentally shape adolescents' behaviour, social lives and development (O'Neill, 2015; Nesi et al, 2020).

How these interactions shape the development of young people depends on the specific characteristics of the online setting. The features of the digital media and technology, and the social interactions that arise through the use of these features, provide specific opportunities for reinforcing positive development and, at the same time, for reinforcing or intensifying (already-existing) vulnerabilities (Boyd, 2010; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011; Livingstone and Haddon, 2012; Valkenburg, 2014; Ross and Tolan, 2021). The influence of the online lifeworld on adolescents' development can best be explained by the term 'online affordances' (Boyd, 2010; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). The concept of affordance dates back to 1979 (Gibson, 1979) and refers to the specific possibilities that objects offer to people. The affordances are characterised by intended possibilities, but users can use these possibilities for unintended purposes (Valkenburg, 2014). For example, the unintended purposes of a coffee mug are being used as a measuring cup in cooking and baking, a cookie cutter, a pen holder or a pot for small plants. Therefore, online affordance 'emerge(s) from the relation between the technology and other actors and is thereby not solely related to the features of the technology' (Aasback, 2022: 3). The literature describes seven affordances that play a role in shaping the developmental needs, interactions and actions of young people in the online lifeworld (Boyd, 2010; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011; Valkenburg, 2014; Moreno and Uhls, 2019; Nesi et al, 2020; Ross and Tolan, 2021).

The affordances listed in Table 1 give adolescents – more than in the offline context – a sense of control and autonomy to determine what, with whom, when and how they communicate and interact (Valkenburg, 2014; Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). Anonymity allows adolescents to explore their identity by anonymously interacting with peers and adults (for example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex

**Table 1: Online affordances**

Affordance	Description
Asynchronicity	Possibility to communicate when it suits the user, either in real time (synchronous) or deferred (asynchronous)
Anonymity	The extent to which the user experiences the communication as anonymous
Accessibility	The ease with which information is sought and contacts are made or maintained
Availability	The user may or may not be online all the time, and can turn alerts on or off on their devices
Scalability	The size of the audience that can witness the communication
Replicability	The ease with which content can be duplicated and distributed
Permanence	The extent to which the user perceives the communication as removable

Source: Adapted from Valkenburg (2014: 262).

[LGBTQI+] adolescents connecting with peers and exploring their sexual identity), while using scalability can promote and validate different aspects of their identity (for example, online gamer, dancer, vlogger, fashion influencer and so on). Affordances also provide greater opportunities for finding information of interest for their own development (for example, information about music, school, social support and so on), connecting with friends and like-minded peers, establishing and engaging in meaningful (intimate) relationships (for example, using and sharing content with hashtags and tags, and using dating apps like Tinder and Grindr), and so on. At the same time, these opportunities can be used in a negative and harmful manner. For example, anonymity, permanence and replicability can enhance risky behaviour, such as cyberbullying, phishing, exposing and grooming, while accessibility can increase access to harmful and illegal activities and substances, and so on.

It is difficult to pinpoint which group of adolescents is using these opportunities to enhance their development and which group tends to develop risky behaviour. However, it can be said that positive or negative experiences in the online lifeworld can be linked to the way in which adolescents perceive the online opportunities and dangers, and their ability – and the support they get within their social environment – to manage them (YoungMinds and Ecorys, 2016). In order to build resilience to online risks and to benefit from online opportunities, the UK Council for Internet Safety (2020) underpins eight aspects of development in the online lifeworld. These eight aspects, displayed in Table 2, are characterised by skills and developmental needs, and are related to how young people interact with peers, digital tools and information in the online lifeworld. Every developmental aspect relates to an objective to achieve the proposed learning outcomes and to meet the developmental needs of adolescents. According to the UK Council for Internet Safety's (2020) study, these objectives can be used to encourage the development of sustainable safe behaviour in the online lifeworld. The eight aspects listed in Table 2 go beyond the three major developmental tasks of adolescents (identity, autonomy and relationships) and give a broad view of the challenges adolescents are facing in the online lifeworld.

The online and offline worlds are intertwined, and they reinforce and complement each other (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011). Both these contexts shape adolescents' behaviour, social lives and development. For this study, however, the analytical differentiation between the online and offline contexts is needed because of the

Table 2: Developmental needs of young people in the online lifeworld

Need	Description
Self-image and identity	Influence of the online lifeworld on identity formation, self-image and behaviour
Online relationships	Influence of the online lifeworld on peer interactions, communication and positive relationships in online communities
Online reputation	Influence of the online lifeworld on shaping one's judgements, opinions and behaviour towards others
Online bullying	Influence of the online lifeworld on cyberbullying and other aggressive behaviour
Managing online information	How adolescents find, view and interpret information in the online lifeworld
Health, well-being and lifestyle	Influence of the online lifeworld on health, well-being and lifestyle, for example, mood, sleep, body health and relationships
Privacy and security	How adolescents use, store, process and share personal information in the online lifeworld
Copyright and ownership	How adolescents protect personal content and how they deal with illegal access, downloading and distribution in the online lifeworld

Source: Adapted from UK Council for Internet Safety (2020: 4).

specific features of the online lifeworld that generate different opportunities and risks for adolescents' development (Lieberman and Schroeder, 2020). Understanding what developmental needs adolescents have in their online lifeworld and what challenges they meet when fulfilling these needs can help youth workers to better engage in the online lifeworld and provide appropriate support to young people.

## Methods

To answer the research question, a qualitative research design was employed. The photovoice research method was used to explore the developmental needs of adolescents in their online lifeworld through photography. By using images as data, this research method gives voice to respondents who otherwise lack the power or opportunity to express their perspectives, and shows aspects of the respondents' experiences that are not easily brought out through words alone (Wang and Burris, 1997). The photovoice method has three goals: (1) enabling respondents to record and reflect their strengths and concerns; (2) promoting critical dialogue and knowledge through group discussions of photographs; and (3) reaching policymakers (Wang and Burris, 1997). This method was chosen because it corresponds very well with the online lifeworld of adolescents. Visual data are very close to how adolescents communicate with peers on social media.

## Photovoice with adolescents

The photovoice started with devising a protocol for the data collection, followed by a workshop where 28 youth workers from 14 youth work organisations in the Netherlands were trained in how to use this protocol and collect the required visual data from young people. With informed consent,<sup>1</sup> the potential respondents were informed about the aim and purpose of the research, privacy and confidentiality, and

what was expected from them. If they agreed to participate in the research, they were instructed on how and in which situations to take part in the research. The visual data were collected by making screenshots on mobile devices. The adolescents were instructed to make screenshots at moments when they were online and experienced certain needs, questions, ambitions, concerns and/or problems, or at moments when they needed support addressing these needs, questions, ambitions, concerns and/or problems. It was taken into consideration that it could be a challenge for some adolescents to understand what exactly was expected of them. Therefore, in situations where they had difficulties understanding the request, the youth workers were instructed to describe a couple of situations that would give an idea to respondents of what a need could be. For instance, the described situations concerned moments when adolescents wanted to meet peers online, wanted to organise or participate in an online activity, needed practical online assistance, or were being cyberbullied, exposed or groomed. The given examples were suited to each respondent, as the youth workers were more or less familiar with the young persons' needs. In this way, it aimed to help the respondents understand what was expected of them and to evoke memories of certain situations and needs that occurred prior to the data collection.

Each respondent was asked to make at least three screenshots for ten days and to send these to the youth workers via private messaging/chat services or email. Each youth worker ( $N = 28$ ) approached at least six respondents. In total, 175 young people participated in the data collection. The respondents were selected by youth workers based on the age criterion. Three age groups were used based on the developmental tasks related to age: 10–15 years old, 16–19 years old and 20–23 years old. In each group, at least 45 young people were included (see [Table 3](#)).

As reflected in [Table 3](#), the respondents formed a heterogeneous group of young people large enough to recognise patterns in the researched issues. They were selected from smaller and larger places in the Netherlands, and from organisations that work on different levels in the online lifeworld (for example, some experience, experienced and advanced experience in working in the online lifeworld).

Most of the collected screenshots were taken from WhatsApp conversations with peers or between adolescents and youth workers, and Instagram and Snapchat posts and private messages, with some from other websites and social media platforms. After ten days of collecting the screenshots, the respondents met online with youth workers for a group conversation to further discuss the needs depicted in the screenshots. Some of the respondents ( $N = 24$ ) were not willing to share screenshots due to privacy concerns or were unable to make proper screenshots illustrating their needs. Instead of making screenshots, they were willing to participate in group conversations with the rest of the respondents and share their experiences and needs in the online lifeworld. All 175 respondents participated in separate group conversations with youth workers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the group conversations took place online with not more than six and not less than two respondents per conversation. The participating youth workers were instructed to discuss all the collected screenshots by using a topic list. Once all the screenshots were discussed, the respondents, together with the youth workers, decided which screenshots depicted their needs in the best way. This resulted

**Table 3: Number of respondents per age group**

10–15 years old	16–19 years old	20–23 years old
45 respondents	76 respondents	54 respondents



in a digital photo album where all the screenshots were anonymised and described in keywords or short descriptions. The descriptions of experiences and needs without screenshots were also added to the photo albums. In total, 26 photo albums were then sent to the researcher for analysis.

## Data analysis

For the analysis of the photo albums, three strategies were employed: (1) a screenshot analysis based on the respondents' interpretations; (2) a screenshot analysis based on the researcher's interpretations; and (3) theorisation (Tsang, 2020). The collected screenshots were first analysed by the respondents. In the group conversations with the youth workers, all the respondents analysed the screenshots by answering questions from a topic list. The topic list consisted of three general questions: (1) 'Can you describe the situation depicted in a screenshot?' (2); 'Why did you take this particular screenshot?'; and (3) 'What need, ambition, question, concern and/or problem did you want to depict with this screenshot?' After answering these questions and discussing them, the youth workers, together with the respondents, described every screenshot in writing using keywords or a short description. The researcher analysed the screenshots and descriptions by examining and categorising them into themes and the three age groups. The screenshots were categorised into themes by the descriptions and keywords in the photo albums (respondents' interpretations of the screenshots), as well as the researcher's interpretation of the actual images depicted in the screenshots. The formulated themes were then examined for the age differences and patterns based on the developmental tasks for each age group. Finally, in the last step – theorising – visual and narrative representations and explanations of the developmental needs were made (Tsang, 2020). In this stage of the analysis, it was sought to identify the relationship between the developmental needs, three specific age groups and the way in which the respondents were meeting their needs.

## Developmental needs of adolescents in the online lifeworld

The data collected with the photovoice method revealed six developmental needs of adolescents in the online lifeworld. The descriptions of the needs are presented in order from the most to the least frequent needs depicted in the collected screenshots,<sup>2</sup> followed at the end of this section by an overview of needs distribution per age group.

### *Need for peer interactions, friendships and (intimate) relationships*

This category describes adolescents' need for engaging in, and having positive interactions with, peers, for building friendships, and for engaging in (intimate) relationships in the online lifeworld. The online lifeworld provides adolescents with many opportunities to interact and to establish and maintain friendships with peers (for example, various chat platforms and online activities and groups). The findings show that adolescents embrace these online opportunities, for example, for having fun and meeting new friends by participating in online gaming tournaments, and for relaxing and strengthening friendships by sharing music, chatting and making plans with each other. For example, one of the collected screenshots shows an online group of friends (16–19 and 20–23 years old) who met each other offline but strengthened



and continued their friendship on Snapchat when face-to-face contact during the COVID-19 pandemic was not possible. This screenshot also shows that all group members use personalised avatars resembling who they are or who they want to be. They are presenting themselves to other friends with their online identities. Besides making friends, experimenting with online identities, having fun and relaxing in these online communities, young people also encounter negative experiences. They noted that they praise the fact that social media gives them many opportunities, but they also express the feeling of less 'real' contact with their friends in the online lifeworld. They point out the importance of speaking to and seeing your friends in real life; otherwise, the friendships can become shallow. Further, respondents also depicted in the screenshots their experiences with cyberbullying, discrimination, exclusion, negative comments on their shared online content and verbal fights in chats and online communities. Some of the respondents (10–15 and 16–19 years old) pointed out that they do not know how to cope with this problem. The following conversation illustrates a negative experience with verbal fights in a chat where an online interaction between two young individuals crosses a line:

- Adolescent 1: 'Your mum abandoned you anyway, poor woman. Bro, you don't deserve to be a Moroccan. Go kill yourself.'
- Adolescent 2: 'Haha look who's talking, a guy who puts his mom on TikTok without wearing a hijab. Are you saying that I don't deserve to be a Moroccan? Bro, you should be ashamed of yourself for having male genitals but acting like a bitch.'

Further, some of the late adolescents and young adults (16–19 and 20–23 years old) had negative experiences when trying to engage in intimate online interactions. By using social media and dating apps (for example, Tinder and Grindr), and trying to connect better with peers and engage in sexual intimacy, they shared personal and intimate information about themselves. By sharing and revealing more intimate images and information, young people lay the foundation for intimate and romantic relationships. At the same time, not recognising the potential risks of these actions can lead to situations where young people become victims of exposing, blackmailing, harassing and bullying. The respondents voiced the need for support in learning to cope with this issue and in establishing positive and healthy intimate relationships. One of the screenshots depicts a chat between two persons where one is being repeatedly asked to share nude photographs. In this situation, the girl decided not to share her nude photographs because she did not trust the person requesting her to do so:

- Unknown person: 'Hey babe.'
- Adolescent: 'Hey hey.'
- Unknown person: 'Maybe a crazy question. Can you send a hot pic of you?'
- Adolescent: 'No, I prefer not to.'
- Unknown person: 'It stays between us, that's ok right?'
- Adolescent: 'No, I don't want to send any pics.'
- Unknown person: 'C'mon you can do it! Why are you acting so weird.'
- Adolescent: 'I'm not doing it, sorry!'
- Unknown person: 'Then I don't want anything to do with you anymore.'

Unlike the case in this situation, the respondents also voiced that their private information and photos do sometimes get reshared, misused and exposed. The findings show that social media platforms, such as Telegram and Snapchat, are used for resharing nudes and compromising information, and exposing, blackmailing and harassing young people, mostly girls.

### *Need for online safety and privacy*

This category describes the influence of the online lifeworld on the safety and privacy of young people. First, the respondents voiced the issues of online scams, spam and phishing messages. The findings show that some respondents have worries about the amount of suspicious text messages and emails they receive online. They fear of account compromise and privacy-sensitive data breaches. Second are the risks of engaging in contact with strangers. The findings show that it is common for young people to receive messages from strangers. Sometimes, these messages contain sexual connotations (for example, older men pretending to be someone else and offering financial support to girls). In these situations, the respondents expressed their worries and feelings of discomfort when receiving such messages and not knowing who is behind them. The following message received from an unknown user illustrates this issue: 'Hello beautiful, I love your profile picture. I'll be happy if you text me back. I'm a sugar daddy, I'm interested in having you as my sugar baby and get you paid weekly. My payment starts from \$3000, let me know if you're interested.'

Third, young and late adolescents (10–15 and 16–19 years old) expressed the need for support when being exposed to drugs and alcohol use, and online illegal and criminal activities. They point out that access and exposure to these illegal and harmful substances and activities is easier and greater online than offline. Via Telegram and other private chat services, young people receive offers to buy drugs direct from dealers in the neighbourhood and are exposed to commercials for gambling.

Fourth, the respondents (10–15 and 16–19 years old) voiced the issue of being confronted with pressure or temptation to participate in dangerous online challenges (for example, the ice and salt challenge, that is, putting salt on skin and then placing an ice cube on top of it, which burns the skin and causes pain, as well as the tide pod challenge, that is, eating small laundry detergent tablets). For example, a text message was reshared among the respondents that warned of a very dangerous online challenge: Blue Whale. In this challenge, young people are encouraged to perform 50 tasks of self-harming behaviour. In the end, the player is induced to commit suicide.

Finally, social media sites are designed to motivate their users to share information about themselves in order to stay connected with other people and expand their network. The findings show that some of the respondents (10–15 years old) are not always aware of what information is privacy sensitive and how they can prevent their information being compromised. For example, the respondents said in group conversations that some young people have an open Instagram account where everyone – even Internet users without an Instagram account – have access to their photographs. They also expressed concerns about the amount of targeted advertisement on social media and possible dangers of privacy compromise. One of the respondents received targeted advertisements on Snapchat and expressed her worries about her online

privacy. She received an advertisement for a dating/marriage app only for Muslims. She is concerned about the trustworthiness of such advertisements and the possible risks that information about her religion and relationship status were compromised.

### *Need for self-presentation and identity formation*

This category addresses the influence of the online lifeworld on forming adolescents' self-image and identity. The online lifeworld gives young people an accessible arena to experiment with, and present different aspects of, themselves and their identity. The findings show that self-image and self-presentation play a significant role in forming adolescents' identity. They share photos and videos of themselves online, presenting to other peers who they are, what they look like and what their likes, dislikes and beliefs are. For example, a respondent who identifies as part of the LGBTQI+ community (20–23 years old), shared their beliefs and support for transgender rights. This individual asked other peers and adults to support an initiative for opening the first European transgender pedestrian crossing (that is, a pedestrian crossing in the colours of the transgender flag: pink, blue and white) by taking a group walk under the theme 'Proud to Be Me'. On the other hand, the findings also show that young people can be in a dilemma regarding which aspect of their identity to share online and how to cope with disapproval and negative reactions to their self-presentation. In one of the collected screenshots, we see a negative comment on a post from a Christian lesbian couple (16–19 years old), criticising their relationship as not approved by God: 'Hmm you should think for yourself what would Jesus do. Jesus wouldn't accept your relationship. A man and woman are made to be together and not what you are doing. Change your account name in We are a lesbian couple and delete that word Christian from your profile name.'

When self-presenting themselves online, late adolescents (16–19 years old) also voiced another dilemma: how to be themselves and not conform to promoted ideal beauty standards on social media. They want to have the right looks and follow the latest fashion trends in order to be accepted by their peers. At the same time, some of the respondents expressed the challenge of staying authentic and unique with their own personality and style while still being accepted and approved by peers. This challenge also awakens the self-consciousness and insecurities of adolescents about their own body and looks. This issue was depicted in the collected screenshots where, mostly girls, would share photographs of themselves on social media in two different outfits. One outfit is labelled as 'fail' and the other as 'done'. With these images, the respondents are asking for peers' approval of their outfit choice and looks.

### *Need for talent development*

Social media and digital technologies offer young people many opportunities: to discover and shape their interests and talents; to get inspiration from others; to develop their talents in music, sports, visual arts, podcasting, dance and so on; and to present their talents to others. The findings show that respondents get appreciation online for something they are good at and are helped to further develop that talent. By emphasising talents, they are encouraged to make an effort, continue learning and take initiatives. Young people expressed the need to get information and learn how to take better photographs and make vlogs (10–15 years old), how to DJ, create and

release music tracks (16–19 and 20–23 years old), and how to conduct online business and promote themselves online as entrepreneurs or artists (16–19 and 20–23 years old). For example, the respondents shared: screenshots of a WhatsApp group where young people share the latest music tunes they like in order to inspire their peers to create their own music; the image of a girl promoting her talent and a small business that she started in the beauty sector; and a screenshot from an Instagram post of a girl live streaming her DJ workshop with open access to anyone with interests in DJing and music.

### *Need for assessing online information*

This category addresses the influence of the online lifeworld on searching, finding, interpreting and evaluating information. The Internet provides adolescents with quick access to vast sources of information. The findings show that young people (16–19 and 20–23 years old) encounter difficulties in finding reliable and useful information, and in distinguishing this from fabricated information or from conspiracy theories. The late adolescents addressed the need for support in assessing the reliability of online information and in dealing with the amount of information that they are exposed to in the online lifeworld. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents (16–19 years old) pointed out that they had difficulties in understanding what the restrictions aimed at COVID-19 entailed and what exactly they meant for them. They were confronted with different opinions and consequences about it, and they needed support in learning how to deal with it. The following quote shows a WhatsApp conversation between a couple of young people making plans to meet each other during the lockdown but not knowing exactly what the current pandemic restrictions are and how to avoid a fine if the police were to catch them in a larger group than allowed:

- Adolescent 1: 'Have you heard from Simon yet?'  
Adolescent 2: 'Yes, he's in.'  
Adolescent 1: 'Cool, then I will ask Bilal too.'  
Adolescent 2: 'He's afraid we will get fined because we will be with more than two people at the same time. So, he might not come.'  
Adolescent 1: 'Police never comes there. If they do come we will split the group in two.'  
Adolescent 2: 'Indeed.'  
Adolescent 1: 'And then you have two small groups.'

In terms of assessing online information, early adolescents (10–15 years old) expressed difficulties interpreting the posts on social media as regards trustworthiness and credibility. Examples of these posts are commercially sponsored posts, viral text messages and photographs or short videos that usually contain controversial, sensational or shocking news and stories. The respondents expressed the need for support in learning how to uncover fake news, misinformation and disinformation from facts. For example, one of the screenshots was from a fake news article depicting a house in flames and with a headline saying: 'Two young girls were kidnapped. The neighbours burned the house of the kidnappers to the ground. Police did not want to intervene.'

Another issue respondents voiced is related to correspondence with formal institutions. Late adolescents (16–19 years old) face new formal duties when they turn 18 years old. In this period, for the first time, these adolescents receive correspondence from the municipality, tax office, health insurance agency and so on. The respondents voiced that some of them have difficulties comprehending what these institutions want and expect from them through digital correspondence. They experience the challenges of independently understanding and fulfilling the requested tasks. While this issue also occurs in the offline setting, the respondents indicated the need for online support and easy-access online assistance when dealing with this problem.

### *Need for health and well-being*

This category addresses the impact of the online lifeworld on adolescents' health and well-being. The data reveal how the online lifeworld gave opportunities for young people to improve their health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, young people were able to join online fitness lessons to stay fit and take part in online game tournaments when feeling bored. The collected screenshots were of images from social media depicting sport promotions, fitness and a healthy lifestyle during the lockdown period. Respondents noted that such content on social media can positively influence their well-being by taking better care of their body and mind. In addition, the respondents voiced that they use social media to look for support when struggling with personal problems. For example, one of the screenshots illustrates how a girl (16–19 years old) was using Instagram to address her well-being and ask for support when feeling lonely, unfulfilled and anxious. Her post says: 'people

**Table 4: Distribution of needs per age group**

Needs	10–15 age group	16–19 age group	20–23 age group
Peer interactions, friendships and (intimate) relationships	Making and strengthening friendships Cyberbullying, discrimination, online hate	Making and strengthening friendships Cyberbullying, discrimination, online hate Intimate relationships	Making and strengthening friendships Intimate relationships
Safety and privacy	Contact with strangers Exposure to drugs and harmful activities Privacy issues	Contact with strangers Exposure to drugs and harmful activities Privacy issues	
Talent development	Creative skills, arts and crafts	Creative skills, arts and crafts Online entrepreneurship	Creative skills, arts and crafts Online entrepreneurship
Online information	Distinguishing trustworthy from misinformation	Finding and assessing information Comprehending administrative correspondence	Finding and assessing information
Health and well-being	Sport and healthy lifestyle	Loneliness, anxiety, drug use and personal issues Sport and healthy lifestyle	Loneliness, anxiety, drug use and personal issues
Self-presentations and identity formation		Presenting aspects of identity Self-image	Presenting aspects of identity

say to me that I'm always positive, a hard worker and fun. I appreciate that but often I feel lonely, unfulfilled and anxious'. In this Instagram post, she openly appeals to everyone who sees her post and recognises these issues to exchange their thoughts in the comments. In order to reach a broader audience interested in these issues, she also used hashtags in her post, such as #loneliness, #beinglonely, #change and #youngpeople.

Lastly, also with reference to the paragraph about the need for online safety and privacy, the respondents indicated the issue of being easily exposed to drugs and alcohol use. For example, on social media, images are shared of young people using laughing gas. Respondents from the age groups 16–19 and 20–23 years old are concerned about the health risks of this drug and expressed a need for more knowledge about the health hazards and effects of this popular drug among adolescents.

### *Distribution of needs per age group*

Table 4 shows the distribution of all described developmental needs per age group.

## **Discussion**

This study revealed six types of developmental needs that arise in the online lifeworld of adolescents. They expressed their needs to: establish autonomy (for example, independently fulfilling formal tasks at 18 years of age and seeking approval of, and control over, physical appearance); express aspects of their identity (for example, presenting themselves, their talents, likes, dislikes and beliefs to others on social media); and engage in peer (intimate) relationships (for example, making friendships in chat groups and in online game tournaments, and using dating apps and exchanging intimate photos with peers). Furthermore, adolescents voiced needs related to online dangers (for example, cyberbullying and contact with strangers), talent development (for example, DJing and making music, and online entrepreneurial skills), privacy (for example, sharing privacy-sensitive information), dealing with online information (for example, uncovering fake news) and healthy lifestyle and well-being (for example, participating in online sport activities, gaining knowledge about drug use and looking for support when feeling lonely, stressed and anxious). The findings show how the online lifeworld interacts in a unique way with the vulnerabilities and risky behaviour of young people. For instance, some respondents pointed out how the online lifeworld influences their self-image. On social media, they are more likely to be confronted with images of unrealistically high beauty standards and expensive lifestyles than they are when offline. In their desire to conform to these standards, some adolescents can use anonymity and accessibility to engage in harmful, illegal or criminal activities in order to achieve this promoted expensive lifestyle. When they do not conform to these standards, they can receive negative feedback from peers, which can lead to a negative self-image, and they can be excluded from their peer group or be bullied. Another example is how to filter the information that adolescents are confronted with online. The algorithms (that is, sets of rules to filter and organise online content) and affordances of social media help limit information overload and enable the easy finding of relevant information (Swart, 2021). However, these features also prohibit users from filtering the displayed content and information. Therefore, as the findings show, young people receive targeted commercials and personalised information that is sorted by the content they are sharing or liking

on social media. Consequently, some adolescents are at risk of receiving one-sided information and having difficulties in assessing the reliability of online information.

These findings align with previous studies (Livingstone and Haddon, 2012; Valkenburg, 2014; Granic et al, 2020; Nesi et al, 2020) showing how adolescents from the three age groups address their developmental needs in the online lifeworld. For example, the findings revealed how young adults (20–23 years old) express their sexual identity online and how they cope with the online opportunities and challenges of engaging in intimate relationships and confrontation with online discrimination and racism. Together with late adolescents (16–19 years old), these two age groups also indicated online opportunities and challenges for gaining autonomy (for example, online job applications, correspondence with formal institutions and learning online entrepreneurship), while young and late adolescents (10–15 and 16–19 years old) expressed the need for positive friendships and interactions, dealing with negative reactions and cyberbullying, and seeking and sharing information about their interests. In an offline youth work setting, these needs for meeting other peers, doing things together and relaxing are met by providing a place and facilities that bring young people together (Metz, 2011). In an online setting, this goal can be achieved through various digital tools and platforms. By bringing adolescents together, youth workers can further motivate young people towards social participation as a broader youth work goal (for example, volunteering and participating in quality leisure activities).

Furthermore, the findings reveal how the influence of the online lifeworld on the development of adolescents is variable and depends on how the users interact within the online context with digital media, tools, peers and adults. For example, some young people use anonymity to feel safe and comfortable when asking questions about, or seeking support for, taboo and personal issues, while others use this affordance to cyberbully peers and participate in illegal and risky activities. Moreover, some of the adolescents use the online information resources, hashtags and tags to find relevant information for their development, while some lose their way in the volume of the online information and do not know how and where to search and find relevant information.

### *Strengths and limitations of the study*

The first strength of this research is that the respondent sample ( $N = 175$ ) is quite large – for a qualitative study – and relatively evenly spread over the three age groups. In line with this, the research was conducted in close collaboration with 14 youth work organisations from seven provinces in the Netherlands. Therefore, it was possible to include varieties of respondents from smaller and larger places, and from organisations that work on different levels in the online lifeworld, which made it possible to increase the generalisation of the findings. This close collaboration with youth work organisations created new possibilities for youth workers to directly gain new insights into the developmental processes of adolescents in the online lifeworld.

The second strength is that the data were collected with a method that corresponds well with the lifeworld of young people. Making screenshots was something very close to how adolescents communicate with peers on social media, which resulted in valuable visual data depicting their experiences in the online lifeworld.



While the photovoice method was a strength of this research, it also brought some limitations with it. First, some of the respondents had privacy issues in sharing the screenshots for the research. Every potential respondent received an informed consent form guaranteeing the complete privacy and anonymity of the collected data beforehand. However, some of the respondents did not share any screenshots but only participated in group conversations. This cautiousness about privacy might also have led to some of the respondents purposely choosing which screenshots to share and which not to, and therefore to not truly representing their needs.

Second, the quality of the screenshots was not consistent. The youth workers reported that some of the respondents had difficulties in comprehending and reflecting on their experiences and needs in the online lifeworld. Therefore, some of the collected screenshots were discarded by young people and youth workers, as they were indistinct or did not depict any developmental needs. In situations where the respondents had problems understanding what they were expected to do, youth workers gave them a couple of examples, suited to their personal situations, of what a need could be and when and where to make a screenshot. These examples might have been somewhat biased and may have led the respondents to make screenshots only about the situations and needs that were named as examples.

Third, the data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. This might have meant that some of the needs depicted by the respondents were much more prominent than in the normal conditions outside the pandemic and multiple lockdowns. In normal circumstances without the curfews and lockdowns, young people might feel less lonely and isolated, and therefore the need for interaction with peers and doing things together would be less reported.

Lastly, the selection of young people was done by the youth workers. They were engaged in the online lifeworld and made easier connections with adolescents, which led to more involvement of young people in making the screenshots. At the same time, the selection of respondents might have been biased. It is possible that the respondents were chosen based on the quality and frequency of the online contact with youth workers, excluding adolescents who were new to the youth work services or had less to no contact with participating youth workers. Additionally, the researcher did not have access to the selection process of the screenshots. During this process, it might have been that respondents and youth workers misjudged some of the screenshots as irrelevant.

## **Conclusion**

These intertwined detrimental and empowering influences on adolescents' development in the online lifeworld require deep understanding from youth workers. The online affordances give adolescents opportunities to reinforce their positive development, while also intensifying their vulnerabilities. From the youth work perspective and regarding its general aims – strengthening the personal development and social participation of young people – youth work needs to consider the ways in which adolescents use online affordances and how these affordances shape interactions in the online lifeworld and the developmental needs of young people. Without specific knowledge of this phenomenon, youth workers will be facing great challenges in understanding in what situations and with what aims they should provide what kind of support, regardless the medium, tool and online space. This poses further challenging

questions for future research: what kind of support do adolescents need from youth workers in the online lifeworld, and what methodical approaches can youth workers employ in the online lifeworld to provide appropriate support?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Due to the informal character of youth work practice and built relationships with young people and their parents, youth workers provided and explained the information sheet, and respondents gave their verbal consent for the anonymised use of the collected data. For the respondents under the age of 16, parents gave their verbal consent.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, the content of the screenshots was anonymised and translated by the authors from Dutch into English.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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