SOCIAL WORK IN DIGITAL TRANSFER

– blending services for the next generation

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Contents

List of original publications

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I Granholm, Camilla (2010) Social support and empowering 90
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II Granholm, Camilla (2012) Young people and Mental Health 114
when ICT becomes a tool of participation in public health in Finland
(pp. 173-186). In Loncle, Patricia, Cuconato, Morena, Muniglia,
Virginie & Walther, Andreas (eds.) Youth Participation in Europe:
Beyond Discourses, Practices and Realities. Policy Press.

III Granholm, Camilla (Forthcoming) Blended lives – ICT talk 130
among vulnerable young people in Finland. Young – Nordic Journal
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social work practice learn from research on online support groups?
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Summary

Camilla Granholm:
Social work in digital transfer – blending services for the next generation

During the last two decades, the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been fast. Smartphones and tablet computers have made the internet and the virtual dimension it offers, available and continuously present in our everyday lives. Drawing from the insights of four sub-studies considering the aspects of ICT use among (potential) clients within social services, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore what consequences, opportunities and risks are to be considered, if and when implementing ICT as a part of future social work practice.

My ontological and epistemological starting points follow the ideas of pragmatism. In this dissertation, pragmatism is seen as a future and development-oriented epistemology, interested not only in what is, but also in what might be. This is a suitable starting point given the situation of contemporary social work where circumstances are changing, and the former knowledge and experiences which form best practice may no longer be applicable. As such, my approach is explorative.

The research process spans almost one decade, and the four sub-studies presented in this dissertation include four sets of data, collected at different points in time between 2005 and 2014. This research contributes new information by offering an insight into the change in approaches to ICT that can be seen among (potential) social work clients. In brief, the sub-studies show that (young) people use ICT as a source of social support and empowering bonding, and also as an arena for participation. For youth at risk of marginalization, ICT offers a channel through which they can escape their everyday problems for a while, and view the lives of peers leading everyday lives which are different from their own.

This dissertation introduces a framework called "blended social work". This framework was developed in order to situate the sub-studies into the continuously developing intersection between social work and ICT. It may also function as a more general framework for exploring and making sense of social work in our time of digital transfer, which is characterized by our simultaneous presence in both online and offline dimensions. Blended social work is anchored in social work, using the global definition of social work as a point of reference. In addition, the results of these sub-studies are used as starting points for exploring how blended social work is realized through the concepts of social support, participation and empowering bonding. In the dissertation, blended social work is left open to further research and development, and it is suggested that future research should focus on determining the expectations and needs of the next generation.

Keywords:
blended social work, digital transfer, information and communication technology (ICT), pragmatism, social work, young people.

Sammanfattning

Camilla Granholm:
Social work in digital transfer – blending services for the next generation

Utvecklingen inom informations- och kommunikationsteknologin (IKT) har under de senaste årtionden skett snabbt. Smarttelefoner och surfplattor har gjort internet och den virtuella dimensionen mobil och ständigt närvarande i vår vardag. Syftet med den här avhandlingen är att utgående från fyra delstudier, med fokus på IKT-användningen bland (potentiella) klienter inom socialservice, undersöka vilka konsekvenser, möjligheter och risker som behöver beaktas om och när IKT implementeras i socialt arbete i framtiden.

Min vetenskapsfilosofiska utgångspunkt finns inom pragmatismen. Pragmatismen är en framtidsorienterad epistemologi som inte enbart intresserar sig för det som är just nu, utan också för det som håller på och blir till. Denna tankeram lämpar sig väl för situationer där omständigheterna förändras och tidigare kunskap och erfarenheter av den "bästa praktiken inte längre är användbara, och där nya, framtida tillämpningar är under utveckling. Mitt närmandesätt är explorativt.

Forskningsprocessen sträcker sig över nästan tio år och de fyra delstudierna som presenteras i den här avhandlingen omfattar fyra olika forskningsmaterial som har samlats in vid olika tillfällen mellan åren 2005 och 2014. Min forskning bidrar med en konkret inblick i hurdan inställningen till IKT bland (potentiella) socialserviceklienter är. I korthet visar delstudierna att IKT bland (unga) människor används som en arena för deltagande och som en källa till socialt stöd. För unga i riskzonen för marginalisering erbjuder IKT en kanal genom vilken de för en stund kan fly sina vardagsproblem och ta del av vardagen bland ungdomar som lever annorlunda liv än de själva.

I den här avhandlingen introduceras flerdimensionellt socialt arbete (blended social work), en tankeram som utvecklats som verktyg för att placera in delstudierna i en kontext, i skärningspunkten mellan socialt arbete och IKT, som är under ständig utveckling. Tankeramen kan också mera generellt ses som ett verktyg som kan användas för undersökningar som strävar efter att förstå socialt arbete i en tid av digitalisering som karaktäriseras av ständig närvaro i två dimensioner, både den uppkopplade (online) och den frånkopplade (offline). Flerdimensionellt socialt arbete har i den här avhandlingen förankrats i socialt arbete med den globala definitionen av socialt arbete som utgångspunkt. Dessutom har resultaten av delstudierna och begreppen socialt stöd, deltagande och stärkande relationer (empowering bonding) använts som utgångspunkter vid utforskandet av hur flerdimensionellt socialt arbete kunde konkretiseras. I avhandlingen lämnas begreppet flerdimensionellt arbete öppet för vidare utveckling med hänvisning till att framtida forskning borde fokusera på de kommande generationernas behov och förväntningar.

Nyckelord:
flerdimensionellt socialt arbete (blended social work), digitalisering, informations- och kommunikationsteknologi (IKT), pragmatism, socialt arbete, ungdomar.

Tiivistelmä

Camilla Granholm:
Social work in digital transfer – blending services for the next generation

Informaatio- ja kommunikaatioteknologia (IKT) on viimeisten vuosikymmenten aikana kehittynyt nopeaa vauhtia. Älypuhelimet ja tablettitietokoneet ovat tehneet internetistä mobiilin ja virtuaalinen ulottuvuus on läsnä aina ja kaikkialla. Tämän väitöskirja perustuu neljään osatutkimukseen, joiden keskiössä on sosiaalityön (potentiaalisten) asiakkaiden IKT:n käyttö. Tavoitteena on tutkia millaisia seurauksia, mahdollisuuksia ja uhkia informaatio- ja tietoteknologia tarjoaa tulevaisuuden sosiaalityölle ja jatkuvasti muuttuvassa toimintaympäristössä kehittyville sosiaalityön uudenlaisille käytännöille.

Tutkimukseni tieteenfilosofisena lähtökohtana on pragmatismi. Sen mukaan tulevaisuuteen orientoituvassa epistemologiassa kiinnostuksen kohteena on nykyhetken lisäksi myös kehitteillä oleva, mahdollinen tulevaisuus. Tämä viitekehys sopii hyvin tutkimukseen, jossa tarkastelunkohteeksi asettuu tilanne, jossa kehitellään uusia tulevaisuuden käytäntöjä, koska toimintaympäristössä tapahtuvien muutosten seurauksena aiempaan tietoon ja kokemuksiin perustuvat käytännöt eivät enää toimi. Lähestymistapani on meneillään olevaa kehitystä kartoittava ja ennakoiva, eksploratiivinen.

Tutkimusprosessini kattaa melkein kymmenen vuotta ja väitöskirjan neljä osajulkaisua perustuvat neljään eri tutkimukseen, joiden aineistot on kerätty vuosien 2005–2014 aikana. Tutkimuksessa rakentuu konkreettinen kuva siitä miten (potentiaaliset) sosiaalityön asiakkaat suhtautuvat IKT:n käyttöön. Osatutkimusten tulosten mukaan nuoret aikuiset käyttävät IKT:a sekä osallistumisen areenana että sosiaalisen tuen ja voimaannuttavan vuorovaikutuksen lähteenä. Syrjäytymisuhan alla eläville nuorille IKT tarjoaa kanavan, jonka kautta voi hetkeksi paeta arkisia ongelmia. Se tarjoaa myös ikkunan ja osallistumismahdollisuuden toisten nuorten elämään ja arkeen.

Väitöskirjassani esittelen sulautuvan sosiaalityö (blended social work) viitekehyksen kuvaamaan ja paikantamaan sosiaalityön ja IKT:n leikkauspisteitä ja jäsentämään niitä toimintayhteyksiä, joihin neljä osatutkimustani liittyvät. Viitekehystä voidaan käyttää myös digiajan kahdessa ulottuvuudessa (online ja off-line) operoivan sosiaalityön tutkimuksen työkaluna. Sulautuva sosiaalityö ankkuroituu myös sosiaalityön uuden kansainvälisen määritelmän (2014) avaamiin keskusteluihin ja arvolähtökohtiin. Osatutkimusteni tulokset osoittavat, että sulautuvan sosiaalityön viitekehys konkretisoituu edelleen sosiaalisen tuen, osallistumisen ja voimaannuttavan vuorovaikutuksen käsittein tarkasteltuna. Sulautuvan sosiaalityön viitekehys tarjoaa lähtökohdan, jonka pohjalta tulevaisuuden sosiaalityötä ja tulevien sukupolvien sosiaalityön palvelutarpeita, odotuksia ja suuntia voidaan hahmottaa, kehittää ja tutkia.

Asiasanat:
sulautuva sosiaalityö (blended social work), digitalisaatio, informaatio- ja kommunikaatioteknologia (IKT), nuoret, pragmatismi, sosiaalityö.

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and just at the right moment. I thank you, Vilma for sharing your brilliantness with me. Next I want to thank PhD Camilla Haavisto and PhD Camilla Nordberg, my "sisters in science" and dear friends, with you I have been able to share my anxiety and sadness during the writing process, and it has been a joy to share moments of happiness and success too. Thank you for always being there for me.

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Prologue

"The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us. Even now, in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work... when you go to church... when you pay your taxes." (The Matrix, 1999)

Since an early age I have been fascinated by the thought of there being another, unknown dimension to life. As a child I played with imaginary friends. My invisible friends were always around and able to meet with me whenever I wanted some company. These "virtual" friends were very real to me. Later in life my enchantment with another dimension has translated into an interest in Sci-fi movies. Therefore I chose to begin this dissertation with a quote from my favorite movie, The Matrix (1999), as this originally fictional statement has in fact become a reality with the merge of online and offline dimensions. This movie and my fascination with the unknown form underlying reasons for my scientific interest in the virtual dimension and how it affects our current everyday lives offline.

1 Introduction

The way we act and interact with each other, and the way we participate in society has changed and is still continuing to do so. A virtual dimension has entered our everyday lives. It is an important arena for our social lives, our learning and education, decision making, and our economy and politics. It is a major source of information and the oracle we often turn to when we need help and guidance. Also, it is where we seek company, pleasure and enjoyment when we have time to fill. We, living in this time of digital transfer have learned to mix elements from both the physical and virtual dimensions (e.g. life-mix Turkle 2011, 157-162). We surf and chat, we express our opinions, share, give comments and 'likes', we exchange, buy and sell online, and all of these actions are closely related to and often realized in our lives offline. Hence, we live blended lives.

The entrance of this new dimension has consequences for welfare, public health and social services. Technology[1], information and communications technology (ICT) and social work are undergoing a process of digital transfer, and play leading parts in this dissertation. The research presented here is situated at the intersection of social work and ICT. In this dissertation I introduce the concept of "blended social work" as my suggestion for a framework for better understanding the role of ICT in current social work practice. Utilizing the virtual dimension in social work would make it easier for social workers to reach out, and be reached by both clients and potential clients. People today live simultaneously in two dimensions, and therefore social work needs to be present in both.

During recent decades ICT has undergone rapid development. Grasping and describing the phenomenon in the context of what has been depicted by contemporary social scientists (e.g. Giddens 1991; Bauman 2001; Beck 1992) as a liquid, uncertain and risky society is challenging. But as Dewey (1938: 29-30) puts it: "We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience we are prepared for doing the same thing in the future". Conducting research involving ICT, as well as practicing social work, is preparing for the future while living under uncertain circumstances. In my research I have tried to follow ongoing developments and have aimed at "extracting […] the full meaning of each present experience". My interpretation of Dewey's statement is that in pragmatic inquiry and knowledge production, change is something that has to be considered as inherent in the given circumstances. This is

1   From here on in this research, the term technology is used as a synonym to ICT, unless otherwise specified.

also emphasized by Göran Goldkuhl (2012:140) who states that "pragmatism has an interest not only for what 'is', but also for what 'might be'; an orientation towards a prospective, not yet realized world". In this sense, pragmatism is a good starting point for my research project which has been about making plans and then changing them, adjusting them to the newly developed circumstances, and aiming to get a glimpse of what social work in the future might look like. This dissertation is based on four sub-studies conducted over a period of almost 10 years. In the sub-studies I use different methods of data collection and therefore my research could be defined as a bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln 1999; Kincheloe 2001; Rogers 2012), where I work and build from what I have at hand (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1966). Bricolage is "particularly suitable, as an approach, for practitioners within health, social care and education […] The emergent nature of bricolage allows for bite-size chunks of research to be carried out that have individual meaning for practice, which can then be pieced together to create a more meaningful whole" (Wibberley 2012, 1-2).

The ontological and epistemological starting points of this research follow the ideas of pragmatism, with a focus on our perspectives of knowledge and how we are able to gain or produce knowledge, in accordance with the theories presented by John Dewey and Jane Addams (e.g. Deegan 1990). I interpret pragmatism as a theory of science that demystifies knowledge and knowledge production (e.g. Hickman 1990). In pragmatism, past experiences and common knowledge is the starting point of every scientific inquiry, and it is through new consciously completed experiments that we gain new experiences. These experiences then serve to build knowledge. This way of viewing knowledge production is not to be confused with building knowledge through experiments in the positivistic sense. Dewey (1938: 43) underlined the uniqueness of every experience (experiment) in his view that: "An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between the individual and, what at the time, constitutes the environment". The experiments we as scientists build our knowledge on can be realized by experiencing and sharing the everyday life of the people or the circumstances we want to get to know better. In a situation where circumstances are changing and the former knowledge and experiences of best practice is no longer applicable, then experimenting and learning by doing are paths by which to increase experiences and knowledge, and to develop future practices. It was by settling in the slums and 'getting their hands dirty' that the women at Hull House (including Jane Addams) mapped and collected knowledge about the people and living conditions of immigrants in Chicago at the beginning of the 20th century (Seltzer & Haldar

2015). Hence, it is appropriate that social work practitioners and researchers today, who are interested in developing practices, besides offline, also in online settings, get acquainted and involved with potential clients in this particular environment.

The history of modern social work has its roots in times of change and dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century. Rapid industrialization in the developed countries brought people from the countryside into cities for work in the factories. In addition to domestic movement in the industrialized countries, there was also an ongoing immigration from poor and less developed countries. During the late 1800's and early 1900's, people from, for instance, Finland and other Nordic and European countries emigrated to the US in hope of finding a better life. The populations in the cities expanded fast and the consequences of this expansion was that the factory workers often had to live in inconvenient and overcrowded conditions. These difficult circumstances made social problems such as poverty, alcoholism and domestic violence a current concern (e.g. Chambon 2013). Jane Addams is referred to as one of the most influential persons in the history of modern social work (e.g. Deegan 1990; Healy 2014; Kananoja 2010; Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006), and in Chicago in the United States, she strived to help people and families settle into their new and rapidly changing society, and to ease the situations faced by factory workers and other people living under untenable conditions. She worked based on the idea that help should be available to people where they are, and that social workers should settle among those who are in need of help and support. It was under these uncertain circumstances that social work as a profession took its first steps.

Today, social work is an internationally recognized and well established profession, and in countries like Finland it has become a basic welfare state institution (Satka1995; Sipilä 1989). Current society, as in the early 20th century, faces many global challenges and changes. As we can witness, people living under poverty, ongoing war or life threatening conditions leave their homes and countries to find better and safer lives in more developed and secure nations. Simultaneous technological developments (including ICT) change the preconditions of people's lives. The workforce needed in factories is reduced as manufacturing processes becoming more automated. Information and news about ongoing natural disasters, crises and conflicts travel fast, and ICT and social media make it possible for people to share their personal perspectives on what is happening in the world. The current situation brings social work back to its roots, making social work professionals reflect on how they could help

and support people under these new and developing circumstances, in an ethically sustainable way. The effect that this division of global populations into more and less wealthy has on people's opportunities to participate in the virtual dimension has been a subject of interest among researchers. Digital inequality has been a subject of research for over twenty-five years, and in the next section I will present the main features discussed among scholars who have investigated these inequality issues.

1.1 Digital inequality

The concept of a digital divide has been used since the 1990s. At first it referred to the unequal opportunities to physically access ICT. In developed countries there has been a rapid increase in access as prices for ICT equipment such as mobile phones, computers and tablet computers have decreased. Recent statistics show that 86 per cent of the Finnish population aged 16-89 uses the internet, with 64 per cent of the same group using the internet several times a day (Official Statistics of Finland 2014). When talking about the digital divide in Finland, access is no longer the main concern. Recently, discussions on the digital divide have turned to ICT skills, which van Dijk and van Deursen (2014, 6) view as "increasingly the key variable of the entire process of access and information inequality in the information society". People with poor internet skills utilize the internet in less versatile ways (Hargittai & Hinnant 2008), and this therefore limits their possibilities for online participation as they might be either unaware or unable to utilize some features of the virtual dimension. The concept of "global divide" has been used when describing these phenomena and when examining trends on a macro level (Norris 2001).

Digital divide due to age, gender, socioeconomic status and level of education are features that have been the focus of recent research (e.g. Ritzhaup et al. 2013; van Deursen et al. 2011). Especially, ICT use among older adults and elderly people has been a concern when discussing the issues of digital inclusion and participation. The ICT use of older adults and the elderly is often more limited than in younger age groups, and hence they are seen as using less technical applications and devices, and tend to use ICT for a limited amount of purposes. Youth use their smartphones for

listening to music, watching movies and chatting, whilst the elderly use their mobile phones mainly for placing calls (Pieri & Diamantinir 2010). The general opinion has been that this situation will slowly resolve itself as the eldest generations who use ICT the least pass away. The rapid development of ICT has not been considered, and whilst younger generations[2] have the skills to use the digital tools of today that does not necessarily mean that they will have the skills to use the digital tools of tomorrow. Education seems to be the most determinant factor when it comes to internet and ICT literacy, and age has been found to affect internet literacy less than the level of education (van Deursen et al. 2011). The differences in ICT use between men and women have been highlighted in research, but the gender gap is closing as women become more familiar with new technology and become more active as users. However, the purposes for ICT use among men and women still differ, as women tend to use the internet as a tool for communication while men use it for information, entertainment and commerce (e.g. Caspi et al. 2008; Joiner et al. 2012; Kuhlemeier and Hemker 2007).

As already mentioned, the digital divide and inequality have consequences for democracy and participation, but they also affect people's opportunities to access information, and to build and maintain social relationships. Viewing digital inequality from an economic perspective, a lack of access impacts issues such as digital consumption and also the employment opportunities which may be open for individuals. All of these spheres affected by the influence of digital inequality are important for social work. The risk for digital marginalization is imminent among social work clients, as they often are less educated, and might be outside employment or employed with work, that do not require a high level of digital skills. These issues will therefore be discussed later in this dissertation when addressing the opportunities and risks of implementing ICT in social work practice.

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2   Technology determinists divide people into two groups: the digital natives and the digital immigrants. Digital natives consist of the generation of children, youths and young adults born in or after 1980. In contrast to the digital immigrants (who were born before 1980), the digital natives have grown up with digital devices, computers, mobile phones and the internet, and are therefore expected to be confident in using ICT (Prensky, 2001). Other researchers, preceding Prensky, have presented similar ideas, terming the young people and young adults who grew up in the 1990s as the Net Generation or Net Kids (Tapscott 1998); the Dot.Com Generation (Stein & Craig 2000); or the Millennials (Howe & Strauss 2000).

1.2 The purpose and design of the dissertation

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore, on the basis of insights drawn from four sub-studies considering the aspects of ICT use among clients within social services, what consequences, opportunities and risks are to be considered, if, and when implementing ICT as a part of future social work practice.

The synthesis of the results of the individual sub-studies presented in this summary article, is constructed by applying the idea of bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln 1999; Kincheloe 2001; 2004; Wibberley 2012). The analysis of the patchwork of "bite-size chunks of research" (Wibberley 2012) consists of the four sub-studies, and gives rise to the introduction of a framework called *"blended social work"*. This framework is developed in order to situate the sub-studies in a continuously changing and developing context which can be seen at the intersection between social work and ICT, and it may also function as a more general framework for exploring and making sense of social work in this time of digital transfer, which is characterized by a simultaneous presence in both online and offline dimensions.[3]

The four sub-studies in this dissertation are to be considered as illustrations of different phases in the ongoing development of how (young) people use ICT as a tool for handling challenges in their everyday lives. The sub-studies explore ICT as a channel for support and participation from different angles, looking at people seeking support in private online settings (sub-study I) or by participating in online groups (sub-studies II and IV). They also feature young people discussing their everyday ICT use in face to face interviews (sub-study III). The results of the sub-studies show that (young) people use ICT as a source of social support and empowering bonding, and as an arena for

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3   In this dissertation I rely on pragmatism as an ontological and epistemological starting point. Together with the concept of blended social work, these approaches provide a good framework for making sense of the empirical studies. Other theories, such as those of affordance (e.g. Treem & Leonardi 2012) or practice (e.g. Goldkuhl 2007) which have also been used in research on ICT use (in social and health care services), could also have been applied.

participation. For youth at risk of marginalization, ICT offer a channel through which they can escape their everyday problems for a while and view the lives of peers leading everyday lives which are different from their own.

In the following chapter, I introduce the reader to the context of Finnish social work, and the international debates and Finnish research considering ICT in social work. In Chapter 3 I discuss the research process and the ethical considerations connected to research conducted in the virtual dimension, and I also give a short presentation of each of the four sub-studies. Chapter 4 introduces blended social work. The summary article ends in a critical discussion (Chapter 5) on the research process, as well as making some suggestions for future research.

2 Context and background of the research

The virtual dimension is, like The Matrix, ever-present and the ongoing process of digital transfer is a global phenomenon. The focus of this dissertation is on Finland, and more specifically on the digital transfer which is taking place in Finnish social work practice. In this chapter I introduce the reader to the context of Finnish social work by giving a short overview of international and Finnish research on implementing ICT in social work practice.

2.1 Social work in the Finnish context

In Finland, qualified social work professionals with a university education are mostly employed in the public sector, working as civil servants for municipalities. A smaller number of social workers are employed by private actors, non-governmental, and non-profit organizations, and by associations producing social and welfare related services. These organizations may produce services for the public sector but there are also many independent actors, some of whom have ideological motives for their activities (Raunio 2004; Vaininen 2011).

Public social work is statutory (The Social Welfare Act 1301/2014) and is publicly funded by tax money. The Social Welfare Act (Chapter 3 Section 14) states that the country's municipalities are responsible for organizing social work, child guidance and family counselling, home services, housing services, institutional care, family care, activities supporting access to employment and specific work for people with disabilities, and measures to establish maintenance for a child. Furthermore, the municipalities are responsible for "organizing child and youth welfare, special care for the mentally handicapped, services and support for people with disabilities, services related to care for substance abusers, the statutory functions of child welfare officers,

other measures related to the investigation and establishment of paternity, adoption counselling, family conciliation, measures pertaining to the conciliation related to the enforcement of decisions on child custody and visiting rights and expert services pertaining to court conciliation of matters concerning child custody and meeting rights, and provision of support for informal care and other social services, and for the duties laid down in the Act on Rehabilitative Work (189/2001), in accordance with any further provisions laid down concerning these services. (317/2014)".[4]

Social work in the municipalities has strong traditions of relationship based practice (Juhila 2006). Confidence and trust between the client and social worker are important, since there is an imbalance in power between the two parties. The client is in a vulnerable position as the social worker has the power to decide whether or not the client will receive (financial) support, whether his/her child or children will be taken into custody, or on implementing coercive measures, for instance when treating substance abusers. Confidentiality is also an important element when building the confidence between the social worker and client. The client has to be assured that the sensitive information he/she shares with his/her social worker does not leak out to third parties. The social worker also needs to rule out deception and be assured that any information the client gives about his/her situation is trustworthy and correct. The use of ICT as a tool for communication and counselling is developing, but there are still many prejudices towards using ICT, due to the strong belief that the only way of establishing a confidential relationship with a client is by meeting them face to face (Parton 2008; Broadhurst & Manson 2014).

The unequal relationship between social workers and the clients is the focus of an article by professor in social work, Aila-Leena Matthies (2013). She argues that: "The normative mission of social work – to support people in need – is structurally based on the categorization of people". This leads to a division with an implicated distance and defined roles, where social workers are viewed as experts and the clients as the receivers of their expert help and advice. This gap is, at least partly, maintained by language, and Matthies suggests that increased communication could bridge this void. Although still quite rare, there are examples of completed projects in which the use of online channels for communication between social workers and clients has been explored (e.g. Karppi et al. 2013; Nikulassi 2008). In his report, Nikulassi (2008) presents the results from the first year of operation of a digital information desk-service, in which

4   This English quote is taken from The Social Welfare Act 710/1982 as the revised law from 2014 has yet not been translated into English.

social workers provided their clients in child and family social services advice and information. These services were developed and made available for clients in the city of Rovaniemi in Northern Finland. Karppi et al. (2013) present the results of the VIRTU-project – an international project carried out in Finland, Åland and Estonia in 2010-2013. The project aimed at supporting the social interaction and ability to stay at home for elderly people, by utilizing welfare technology. Opening up more channels of communication and making sure that people will get the help they need are some of the features which are addressed in the ongoing reforms considering social and health care services in Finland.

There are currently two major changes considering the organization of public social and health care services being introduced in Finland. The first one regards the payment of income support and therefore only affects the social welfare services. The public social work offices in each municipality have hitherto been responsible for receiving, processing and deciding on applications, and the payment of income support. The application process for income support will be digitalized, so that all applicants will complete their applications online, and from the beginning of the 2017, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) will be responsible for delivering basic income support services. (Kela 2015.)

The other ongoing change is the preparation of a reform in public social welfare and health care services (Sote). The objective of the reform is to reduce inequalities in well-being and health among the citizens, and to manage costs. The reform aims to strengthen basic services and to ensure people's rapid access to care. In order to reach these goals, social welfare and health care services will be integrated on all levels. The government is looking to introduce a model with a maximum of 19 Sote-districts in Finland. Starting from 2019, each district will be responsible for arranging all of the public social welfare and health care services in their own area. Digitalization and the effective utilization of ICT are mentioned as important preconditions for the Sote-reform (Healthcare, social welfare and regional government reform package 2016).

Both of these changes also include an increasing reliance on digital services and on implementing ICT in social work services. The digitalization of the application for income support has already commenced and the process is already being piloted at social service offices in some municipalities. What digitalization and the utilization of ICT in the delivery of services in the upcoming Sote-districts will concretely mean is still unclear. An information sheet published by the Ministry of Social Affairs and

Health states: "In the reform we want to make sure that digitalization is fully utilized. The information systems need to be reconciled so that the information flow between different actors is ensured. Electronic services will be built for clients."[5] (Ministry of social affairs and health 2015).

In contrast to the rather slow ICT-development seen in public social work, the private actors, non-governmental and non-profit organizations, and the associations producing social and welfare related services have acknowledged the opportunities that online tools can provide for people in difficult situations, and now offer various forms of help and support on the internet. Organizations such as the Finnish Association for Mental Health (www.mielenterveysseura.fi), the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (www.mll.fi), and the student support center Nyyti ry (www.nyyti.fi) provide their clients with online services and support. These actors have no statutory duties and have therefore been free to try out and experiment with different approaches for delivering services and reaching out to clients and potential clients. The activities in these organizations are funded either by private foundations or by Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY), and therefore their financial framework is more flexible than for publicly funded municipal social work in regard to introducing and experimenting new practices such as implementing ICT into social work.

In this dissertation social work is viewed broadly, and as including social work performed in public agencies and social work performed by private and non-profit organizations. The sub-studies presented in this study are mainly performed in the non-governmental and non-profit sphere of social work, due to the fact that implementing technology in social work practice in the public sector is currently under development and still quite rare.

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5   This translation is by the author and the original text in Finnish states: "Uudistuksessa halutaan varmistaa digitalisaation hyödyntäminen täysimääräisesti. Tietojärjestelmät on sovitettava yhteen ja varmistettava tiedonkulku eri toimijoiden välillä. Asiakkaille rakennetaan sähköisiä palveluja."

2.2 Scholarly debates on ICT in social work

The scholarly literature on ICT in social work is increasing as the virtual dimension enters social services and social work practices. In this chapter I give a brief overview of primarily international literature which discusses the challenges and opportunities faced in the implementation of ICT in social work. I end the chapter by discussing the still very limited amount of Finnish academic research on the subject.

An overview of the history of internet technology and social work is given by Marson (1997). Even though the text was written almost two decades ago, some of the core arguments raised are still applicable. When Marson (ibid) states that "Social workers have a long history in technology avoidance", and he refers back to Mary Richmond (1911) who encouraged social workers in the early 1900's to utilize the telephone as a tool for practice. McCarty and Clancy (2002, 153) view that "Nearly everything a social worker does face to face could be done online", and although ICT has slowly crept into social work practice (Mishna et. al. 2012) the rate of ICT adoption among social workers is generally still less than in other professions (Baker et al. 2014; Craig & Calleja Lorenzo 2014; Gillingham 2014; Hill & Shaw 2011) such as teachers or health care professionals. The aversions of social workers to implementing technology have been presented and explained in many ways over the last decades: Neugeboren (1996) talked about "computer phobia" when presenting his concerns regarding the scarce use of computers in social work. The inabilities of technologies that are designed and implemented without consulting the end users (i.e. the social workers) to meet the needs of their everyday practice is another explanation for antipathy (Broadhurst & Mason 2014; Gillingham 2014; Hill & Shaw 2011). Also present is a fear of losing the social-dimension of social work, either when face to face meetings with clients are replaced by virtual contact (Ferguson & Woodward 2009; Rogowski 2010), or perhaps more abstractly when the documentation in digital systems becomes "informational" instead of "narrative" in character (Parton 2008).

There is an ongoing debate about how an increased use of ICT in social work affects direct face to face practice. The use of ICT is assumed to negatively affect the time social workers spend face to face with their clients. For example, Parton (2008) argues that social work agencies are less concerned with the social dimension of social work, and their concerns have shifted towards documenting and sharing information about

clients, and reporting decisions and interventions to co-operating professionals and agencies. Other researchers argue that online practice can be used to enhance the social dimension of social work (e.g. Holmes & Foster 2012; LaMendola 2010). Viewing this debate from a wider perspective, it seems that it confuses two different things: The research claiming that ICT has alienated social workers from their clients could be interpreted as an implicit or explicit criticism towards New Public Management, and digital documentation practices are used as an example of how badly this top-down control management model fits current social work practice (e.g. Broadhurst & Manson 2014; Gillingham 2013; Parton 2008). Alternatively, research presenting ICT as a tool for increased social engagement with clients considers the more therapeutic features of social work and counseling practice, and reflects areas where the development has been practice led (e.g. Holmes & Foster 2012; Kiluk et al. 2014; LaMendola 2010). Thus, ICT has become a part of practice, and not the other way around (Hill & Shaw 2011). Reviewing earlier research concerning the implementation of ICT in social work reveals three main areas of study. The first area considers information systems and the use of ICT as a tool for documenting and keeping records. The second area has its focus on ICT as a tool to be used in more therapeutic counseling work. The third and the least research area considers "how the increasing use of ICT has filtered into social work practice in contrast to its uses as a direct treatment method" (Mishna et al. 2014). There are a few textbooks aimed for an academic audience (Hill & Shaw 2011; Watling & Rogers 2012) that give a general overview of the phenomenon of ICT and social work. The emphasis in the Finnish academic research on ICT in social work has been in the first area, and examples can be found in the majority of the articles featured in the yearbook "Social work, knowledge and technology" by The Finnish Society of Social Work Research, and which consider information systems used for documenting client cases.

2.2.1 Finnish academic research considering ICT in social work

The Finnish academic research considering ICT in social work is still quite limited, which may be surprising given that Finland is often considered as having been a pioneer in technological development. One attempt to map and collect the academic research on the implementation of ICT in social work practice has been made by The Finnish Society of Social Work Research. In 2010 the society published a yearbook titled "Social work, knowledge and technology" [*Sosiaalityö, tieto ja teknologia*] (Pohjola et al. 2010). The yearbook includes thirteen articles by various researchers presenting the current situation and development trends in applying technology in the field of social work in Finland.

Six universities in Finland provide education in social work on a master's or doctoral level: the universities of Helsinki, Turku, Tampere and Jyväskylä, the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Lapland. A review of the doctoral dissertations in social work published at these universities during the last 10 years, showed that only two of the dissertations considered social work and ICT. In comparison, during the period 2005-2015, there have been 33 doctoral dissertations in social work published within the Post-Graduate School for Social Work and Social Welfare, managed by Sosnet, the Finnish National University Network for Social Work. However, neither of the two dissertations considering ICT in social work were published within the Sosnet post-graduate school.

The first doctoral dissertation considering ICT in social work was published at the University of Helsinki in 2013. This monograph dissertation studies computer-mediated communication as a dialog, based on the structural concepts of Mihail Bahtin. In her dissertation, Rahikka (2013) analyzes the narratives of social and health care professionals working in non-governmental organizations providing online support services. She studies how these professionals define online services, and how they describe computer mediated communication between professional and client in their narratives. The result of her study shows that the social and health care professionals interviewed define online services as being independent of time and place, and as an anonymous support mechanism that is used for guiding clients towards face to face services. The professionals mention there being a tension when communication with clients is computer-mediated, as the professionals have to balance

between communicating their expert and distant role, with a more personal and encountering role.

The second Finnish doctoral dissertation considering ICT in social work was published at the University of Tampere (Räsänen 2014). In her dissertation, consisting of four published scientific articles and a summary article, Jenni-Mari Räsänen focuses on IT (information technology)-based recording, as well as the transfer and retrieval of (client) information across agencies in the context of emergency social work. The study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the ways that computers and computer systems are utilized in emergency social work practice. In her research, Räsänen uses an ethno-methodological approach, where talk and actions are explored in situations of interaction. Her main research data consists of interviews with social workers and video recorded encounters between emergency social workers and their clients, and includes observations, video recordings, photographs, memos and entrance negotiations. The conclusion Räsänen draws from her four sub-studies is that information technologies play an essential part in emergency social work services and that emergency social work is dependent on computers. But she also concludes that information technology is not the only basis for operation in emergency social services, and that interaction in various directions is needed when making sense of a client's individual case.

This short overview of Finnish academic studies at the intersection of social work and ICT above show that there is room for more research in this area. In general, scholarly research and literature on this topic (both Finnish and international) that can be utilized in university curricula in social work is quite rare. This might be due to the novelty of the topic, but more likely are the contradictory opinions among social work researchers and practitioners, as to whether or not ICT is a suitable tool for social work practice.

3 Research design

This chapter provides insight to the four sub-studies, which are the core elements of this dissertation. In the first part of the chapter I give a general, but quite detailed, overview of the research process, as in itself it has been crucial for the outcome of this dissertation. In the second section of this chapter I present the ethical framework for research in the online environment. In the third section of the chapter I discuss the methodological and ethical procedures relating to each separate sub-study, including short presentations of the main results of the studies.

3.1 A general overview of the research process

The history of this dissertation goes back to 2003, when I became involved in the non-governmental (NGO) and non-profit organization Nyyti. The aim of the organization is to support and promote mental well-being among youth, and students in particular. Nyyti was founded by student organizations in Helsinki in 1984 and by the beginning of the 2000s it had developed into a nationwide organization employing several social and healthcare professionals who were in charge of everyday activities. The Nyyti organization had supported students by being open for individual face to face encounters, and offering telephone hotline services and support groups. The visits and telephone services were facilitated by trained volunteers. Since 1995, the organization has also offered support over the internet, through e-mail which is answered by the volunteers (Ilolakso 2005).

In 2003, being a student myself, I participated in the training for volunteers at Nyyti and became part of the team taking calls and answering online messages. The same year, the asynchronous web-based service called the Virtual Shoulder opened. I was impressed by the way that the small organization fearlessly explored what new

technologies could offer young people in need of help and support. My experiences as a volunteer answering the messages written to the Virtual Shoulder was that there was an obvious need for this kind of online support, and it was especially suited to students and young people who were familiar with the technology being used. These experiences led me to write my master's thesis in social work about online support, in which I analyzed messages written to the Virtual Shoulder. This small scale research in online support was carried out in 2005 and reported in 2006 (the data used for this research was later re-analyzed and is presented as sub-study I). While writing my master's thesis I found that research considering online support was still quite rare in social work, and this made me decide to continue my research as a PhD-project. When the project was planned in 2007, the original aim was to dig deeper into the messages written to the Virtual Shoulder and the follow up correspondence as up to five messages were sent by those contacting the Virtual Shoulder. My plan was to analyze both the help-seekers messages and the answers provided by the trained volunteer. The results of the study were supposed to be reported in a monograph.

As discussed above, in social work research in Finland, ICT related studies are still relatively rare, and in 2007 when I was starting the research process they were even more unusual. Performing social scientific research involving ICT over the last nine years has not been an easy task, as the rate of technological development has been rapid. The most significant changes in ICT during the last ten years might be the entrance of social media and the proliferation of smart phones, the combination of which has made online communication more interactive and in many cases synchronous. This change was noticed within Nyyti, and as technology developed and became more interactive, then the expectations among the university students was seen to change. During the fall of 2005, the first supervised and moderated online discussion group for students suffering from loneliness[6] commenced its activity. After the introduction of the online discussion group, the popularity of the Virtual Shoulder faded and it was shut down at the end of 2010. These changes had an impact on my research. My aim was to produce knowledge that could be used for developing online social services and support, and as the Virtual Shoulder was shut down I felt it was unjustified to carry on research which related to it. Instead I decided to also explore the recently introduced moderated online discussion groups. This new turn in the research is reported in sub-study II, which analyzes the interaction in the moderated discussion group services provided by Nyyti.

6   Loneliness was chosen as the topic for the first online discussion group as it was the most common reason shown for contacting the Virtual Shoulder.

At this point of my research process I was very excited about online support, and the new possibilities that I felt using technology for solving people's problems would open up. I was certain that technology could save time and money, and also make the lives of both social workers and their clients easier. When talking to people and presenting my research to social workers and academics in social work, I was surprised by the skeptical attitudes I encountered. Neither the social work professionals nor the academics seemed to acknowledge the benefits and opportunities of implementing technology in social work practice; rather they were critical towards it, emphasizing the dangers, challenges and ethical considerations in using technology as a tool in social work practice (and also the considerations of conducting research among vulnerable people in online environments). At first I thought the problem was that my arguments were not convincing enough, and that I had to read more and make my arguments stronger, but I kept running in to the same wall over and over again. This was a crucial point, and the breakdown point (Agar 1986) in my research process. Referring to Agar (1986, 21), a breakdown can be explained as "a lack of fit" between the researchers own experience and expectations for the research object and their "encounter with a tradition". To resolve a situation like this the researcher has to try to understand the "the cultural elements causing the breakdown" and adjust their research schema accordingly (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007). In this case I interpreted one of "the cultural elements causing the breakdown" as being the strong tradition in social work practice of emphasizing the importance of meeting clients face to face.

In spring 2013, I participated in a seminar considering blended learning in Finnish higher education. The presentations during this seminar ended up being crucial for my research as they resulted in a formulation of the idea of blended social work. It felt as if the idea of blended social was the answer to the questions that had caused my research breakdown. Blended social work, like blended learning does not promote virtual tools or practices over face to face tools and practices, but suggests a thoughtful integration of face to face and online tools and practices. The idea is to use the most optimal tools and practices in each situation, acknowledging that people today live in two dimensions. The idea of blended social work includes elements of pragmatic thinking, where each situation is considered open-mindedly, and no assumptions are made that a practice or tool that was functional in a similar previous situation will fit the current one (Dewey 1938).

When I started developing the idea of blended social work, I felt a need to discuss ICT use among social work clients. Offering online services in public social work would be a waste if clients did not have the equipment, skills or motivation to use them. Therefore I wanted to know what kind of ICT equipment they used and for what purposes. When starting to prepare the new sub-study, I first contacted some public social work agencies that were piloting a digital application form for income support. The social workers were very interested in co-operating, but unfortunately the recruitment of participants among the clients failed. During fall 2013, I came in contact with some training programs for youth outside employment and education. The organization coordinating the training programs is a private-public mix and the training programs work close together with the public sector (e.g. schools, mental health services). At this point of the research process I experienced a need to start finalizing the dissertation, therefore the data collection for the third sub-study was planned and realized within a relatively short period of time in January-April 2014. The article reporting the results of this sub-study was written simultaneously with this dissertation summary.

The literature review presented in sub-study IV is the result of a very long collaborative writing process. The first drafts of the article were written and offered for publication in Swedish in 2012. The idea for this article sprung from a mutual interest in online support with my co-author Vilma Lehtinen, who I met while she was working on her PhD dissertation in social psychology. This article has since been translated and developed into a more theoretical investigation of the literature considering online support groups in social scientific research. Besides learning the process of compiling a review article, the writing has also been interesting in the sense that it has made me realize the joys and benefits of collaborative writing. The final version of this review article and the article documenting sub-study III have been under construction whilst writing the summary of the research process and the included studies.

3.2 The ethical framework for research in times of digital transfer

> "[Social work] *research (like practice) is not just about individuals in social situations who are in need of professional engagement, there is also an awareness and acknowledgement that service users are unique individuals living within complex and uncertain circumstances. When engaging in social work research, we are not simply extracting information from particular respondents within certain groups. We are engaging with people to make a difference."* (Hardwick & Worsley 2011, 29)

Ethical consideration is part of all research practices, and present in all stages of the process from planning the research to reporting the results. Principles that are indorsed in the research community are integrity, meticulousness and accuracy in conducting research, and also in recording, presenting and evaluating the research results. Legislation concerning research ethics, together with more general guidelines for the responsible conduct of research are given on a national level, and more specific guidelines which pertain certain disciplines are given by the research communities, and frame and guide researchers in their work. Basic ethics in research involving human subjects include the requirements of respect for autonomy and human value. Ethically sustainable research avoids causing harm to any of the participants and guarantees the privacy of informants (Kuula 2006).

Social work research often deals with sensitive topics and involves vulnerable participants. The current research aims at exploring social inequalities and the preconditions for change, and under these conditions ethical considerations become even more important. Social work researchers might use the online dimension for collecting data, for example by observing the interaction in both synchronous and asynchronous settings, research participants may be recruited through online forums and informants can be interviewed using ICT. There are online tools and applications available that can be used in the analysis of the collected data, and the virtual dimension may also used for the dissemination of research results (Moylan et al. 2015).

Conducting research on sensitive topics with vulnerable participants in virtual environments might indicate a need for careful ethical deliberation. When discussing internet research ethics, Kuula (1996:192-195) raised the difficulties involved in defining concepts like place and reality, and private and public in online environments.

These difficulties may challenge the ethical decision-making which takes place in this type of research. The internet is global and people regard and interpret the information available from it from their own cultural perspectives. The use and contents of the internet are constantly changing, especially since the internet has become portable and also the entrance of social media, and these facts affect issues of research ethics (Markham & Buchanan 2012). When conducting research in new and developing online environments, it is likely that unforeseen ethical issues may occur during the research process (Roberts 2015). The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) is an interdisciplinary organization gathering researchers mostly from the social sciences and humanities. The association has developed a set of ethical guidelines for internet research. The current version of the guidelines were compiled in 2012 (Markham & Buchanan 2012) and they advocate a reflexive, case-based approach, providing researchers with a set of considerations to use when making decisions about the planned research.

So, how can researchers ensure that the people who have produced online content which may then be collected and used for research purposes, are aware of the fact that it may be used in this way? This is a question that has been frequently discussed among internet researchers (e.g. Mc Kee & Porter 2009; Sveningsson Elm 2009; Buchanan & Markham 2012). Figure 1 (below) shows an easy tool developed by Heidi Mc Kee and James Porter (2009), originally for evaluating the need for signed consent. According to this tool, the need for signed consent is more likely if the online environments where the research is undertaken are private, the research topic is sensitive, and the level of interaction and subject vulnerability is high. The tool gives a result that can be used only for illustrative purposes, and gives the researcher an implication which may be taken under consideration when deciding whether or not to ask for informed consent. In a wider sense, this tool could be used as an indicator of how serious research ethical considerations might generally be in a certain research context.

Public vs private	Topic sensitivity	Degree of interaction	Subject vulnerability	Is consent necessary?
High	High	High	High	Likely
↕	↕	↕	↕	↕
Low	Low	Low	Low	Not likely
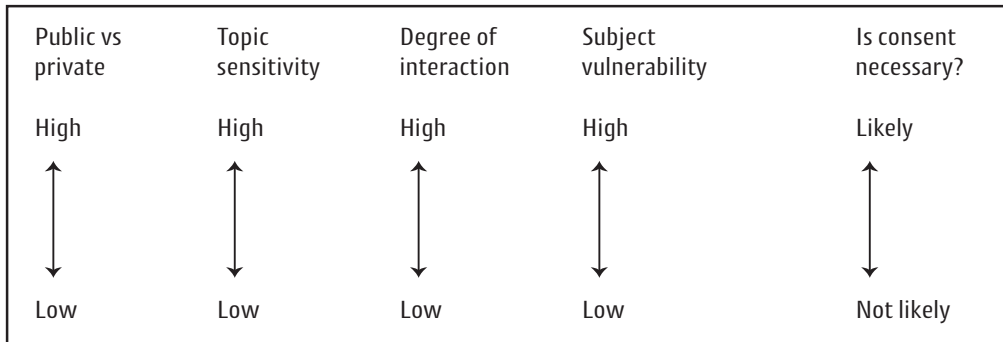
Figure 1   Research variables affecting the question of whether informed consent is necessary (Mc Kee & Porter 2009, 88).

Many non-governmental organizations which offer virtual support work together with researchers as they evaluate and develop their online services. Using academic research as a developmental strategy lends the organization and its services credibility. Researchers are often asked to evaluate the services by looking at client contact and response. However, organizations have not always taken the issues of online ethics into account, and practical and ethical dilemmas may arise as clients might not have been informed of the fact that their contact might be used for research purposes. One solution to this problem is for organizations to develop a set of guidelines relating to how the data produced by their online services may be collected and used by researchers. The tool for evaluating the need for informed consent (McKee & Porter 2009) presented in Figure 1 can be helpful when considering the structure of these guidelines. Therefore, the conclusion of this section is that unexpected ethical challenges might occur when conducting research in online settings, but there are available tools that support ethical decision making when operating in the virtual dimension.

3.3 The methods, ethics and results of the four sub-studies

As stated earlier, the research presented in this dissertation has been undertaken during a period of rapid change and development in the study area, therefore the research presented in this dissertation is characterized by a qualitative and exploratory approach. Qualitative research is considered to be a useful approach when studying new phenomena, and also when the research purpose is to highlight the participant's viewpoint of the story (David & Sutton 2011; Tracey 2013).

Table 1	Brief overview of the sub-studies.	
Sub-study	**1**	**2**
Title of the article	Social support and empowering bonding in supporting online environments.	Young people and Mental Health: when ICT becomes a tool of participation in public health in Finland.
Research questions	What are the challenges and opportunities posed by supporting online environments? How could online environments be used by helping professions in the public sector?	How can participation through ICT and particularly the internet be used for maintaining and promoting mental wellbeing by young people in Finland?
Theoretical framework/ framing concepts	Loneliness, social relations and social support	Participation, loneliness, social support
Data	43 private messages selected from the archived messages written to the Virtual Shoulder service in 2005.	58 messages posted in 2010 to a supervised online counselling group for university students, on the topic of loneliness. Overview of recent research and literature describing the current situation in Finland.
Analysis	Qualitative inductive content analysis	Qualitative content analysis
Results	The benefits of virtual services are their low threshold, easy access and openness. The danger is that service users might disclose too much without reflecting on any risks that registering to an online service may entail, or the potential interests of commercial parties. New technology is flexible and there are a number of ways of applying it. The internet can, besides more permanent and individual services, also offer rapidly targeted services for example in a crises situation.	Turning to the internet to seek information, professional help and peer support occurs naturally for university students. Young adults are also eager to share their experiences on virtual arenas and to support others in need.

The dissertation consists of four sub-studies with a focus on clients or potential clients of social services. Sub-studies I-II shed light on how young people experiencing challenging situations in life, can and do use ICT as a tool for seeking help and support. Sub-study III shows how young adults (potential clients) use ICT in their everyday life, and sub-study IV gives an overview on the research considering online support groups. The data used in the sub-studies covers a timespan of more than a decade and thereby gives an overview of the developments in using ICT for helping and supporting people experiencing difficulties in life.

3

Blended lives: ICT talk among vulnerable young people in Finland.

How do the young people use ICT? What kind of need does their ICT use fulfill?

The uses and gratification approach is used as starting point, with McQuail's typology of individual motives for media use as a framework for the analysis.

3+3 group interviews (11 participants all together) and 3 individual interviews with young people and 1 group interview with the supervisors involved in the workshops. The interviews were conducted during January-April 2014.

Qualitative content analysis.

Most of the young people featured in the study use ICT for entertainment, but their use is diverse. Young people choose the tools and the dimension for interaction that best fulfills their needs, blending together ingredients from both online and offline sources. Unlike the findings of previous research, offline interaction is important to these youth, and they prefer talking to someone face to face about severe (health-related or emotional) problems.

4

What can social work practice learn from research on online support groups?

A selective literature review assessing the relevance of research dealing with online support groups to social work practice.

Examines the research itself, and the scientific positioning and perspectives termed by Doise (1986) as the levels in the research.

76 publications, spanning a period from 2003 to 2014. Data was retrieved from databases that cover the field of social sciences and social services, including EBSCO (Academic Search Complete), ProQuest and Web of Science.

Qualitative content analysis inspired by Doise's (1986) levels of analysis in experimental social psychology.

We found that methodological individualism thrives in the literature, while studies on positional factors such as the dynamics deriving from the positions of the client and the professional are comparatively rare.

3.3.1 Sub-study I:
Exploring private and asynchronous online support

The first study focuses on messages written in 2005 to "The Virtual Shoulder", an asynchronous online service where Finnish university students were able to discuss challenging life situations via private messages, with professionals and trained volunteers at the Nyyti Student Support Center. "The Virtual Shoulder" is one of the oldest internet based services offering help and support in Finland. The operation started in 1992 initially through e-mail, and in 2003 it became a web-based service. During its golden days, the service received over 800 messages a year (Granholm 2010, 159) and could be described as a child of its time. As technology developed and became more interactive, the expectations among the university students changed. During the fall of 2005, a supervised and moderated online discussion group for students suffering from loneliness[7] was started. After the introduction of these online discussion groups, the popularity of the Virtual Shoulder faded and it was shut down at the end of 2010. This study explores the early days of online support, delivered by a professional organization in the non-governmental sector. The communication was private and asynchronous, and the platform offered a safe environment for disclosing and reflecting on intimate thoughts and feelings, and as Turkle (1997, 26) puts it, the internet offers an arena where people are able to experiment with their identities.

The research presented in the first sub-study is qualitative and inductive. The research method used is similar to the qualitative content analysis described by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002, 110–115). In addition to this analysis, a qualitative content specification method was used (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 185–188). I started reading the research data without a specific theoretical frame, and my aim was not to verify any existing theory. However the inductive exploration of the research data resulted in focusing on the concepts of loneliness and social support, which then developed into the theoretical frame for this research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 83).

In sub-study I, online support is considered from the clients' point of view, exploring her/his thoughts and feelings and reflecting on the reasons why these people seek help online. The results of the study show that a lack of social relationships is not the

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7   Loneliness was chosen as the topic for the first online discussion group as it was the most common reason for contacting the Virtual Shoulder.

reason why people turn to the internet with their problems. Instead, it seems that a wish for anonymous disclosure and to get an outsiders point of view on their situation makes the students in this research look for help online. What is significant to notice considering this sub-study, is that 2005 was a time when turning to the internet was not a given reaction when a problematic situation occurred. Placing this study in the context of social work research, it falls nicely into the group of studies where ICT is considered as a tool in more therapy oriented or counseling work (Mishna et al. 2014).

While reporting the first sub-study, I considered whether or not to use excerpts from the messages in my text. As I didn't have the signed consent of the persons behind the messages, and as it also was impossible for me to obtain them at that point, I decided not to use excerpts. Especially, the Virtual Shoulder platform where the data was collected is a private service, and the topics discussed are sensitive, the students writing to the service are often experiencing severe difficulties in life and can therefore be considered vulnerable, and so this also influenced my decision. Sub-study II includes a few excerpts from messages posted to the online discussion groups, however these groups are public.

3.3.2 Sub-Study II:
Discovering the benefits of online discussion groups

The nature of the second sub-study was descriptive, presenting recent research and literature considering health (and especially mental health issues) among Finnish university students. The framing concept of this study was participation, which also was used as a guiding concept in the analysis. The second sub-study examines how participation through ICT and particularly the internet is used for maintaining and promoting mental wellbeing by young people in Finland. The empirical material for this sub-study consisted of messages posted to the online discussion group on the topic of loneliness in the year 2010. The discussion group was asynchronous and moderated by the professionals at Nyyti. This discussion group deals with the topic of loneliness and the discussions in this group are of a sensitive nature. The group is open to anybody to read, but participation in the discussion requires registration and all posts

are moderated by professionals at the service company Nyyti. This arrangement makes these moderated online discussions available for anybody who wishes to collect and use the data for research or any other purpose. When registering as a user, the participant checks a box which indicates that he/she has read and accepted the terms of use. These terms of use include a paragraph pointing out that the online discussions can be used for research purposes. The question is whether or not this procedure is in itself enough to make sure that participants are aware of the fact that their posts can be used as research data.

Five years had passed since the messages analysed in my first study were written. Over this period, everyday life had become much more blended as social media sites, tablet computers and smart phones became more common. Sub-study II concludes that the students participating in the online discussion group perceived it as an empowering experience. The Virtual Shoulder offered the client the reaction of a professional or trained volunteer, but in the supervised and moderated discussion groups, students were able to get both a professional and a peer response to her/his disclosure. Many participants indicated that they had been following the discussions of the discussion group for a long time before deciding to write a message themselves. This leads to a reflection on the positive features of the virtual dimension - public online discussion groups can serve as a great means of support for both active participants and for silent readers who may benefit from finding out that there are other people who share experiences similar to their own. This quality is a significant finding of this sub-study and is important to acknowledge in social work practice. Reflecting on the ethical pros and cons is also raised as an important issue when considering the use of public online interventions. Another object for consideration is whether or not to use technology that enables synchronous communication. The benefit of using asynchronous, moderated services is that it minimises the risk of improper or harmful discussions. Like the first sub-study, the second sub-study contributes to social work research where ICT is considered as a tool in more therapy oriented or counseling work.

The empirical data I used in sub-studies I and II was supplied by the Nyyti Student Support Center and was only used for research purposes. Information on how and for what purposes archived messages written on the Virtual Shoulder platform and the discussions of the online counseling groups can be used for may be found on the website of Nyyti ry (www.nyyt.fi). Those who registered as users for the "Virtual Shoulder" and also for later discussion groups are presented with a link to the

operating guidelines of Nyyti. These guidelines stipulate that all messages written to the online services will be archived, and that the archived messages can be used for research, but only when separated from the background information given at the time of registration. The guidelines also point out that messages used for research purposes cannot be used in a way that describes any of the cases in detail, or can lead to the revelation of a client's identity. As I started writing my first article, I became intensely aware of the ethical challenges of my research, and was wondering how I could write the report in a way that maintained the research obligations to the clients and did not reveal any undue detail of the cases I had studied.

These situations are probably familiar to most researchers collecting and using material on the virtual services provided by different kinds of organizations. As such, looking at why these problems occur has since become one of my personal research interests. One reason could be the rapid development of online services, and another might be the great increase in the public demand for virtual services. Organizations that have earlier offered their services mostly offline are suddenly faced with a demand to develop services for online use. In this process, their foremost action is to see to that the service looks good, and that it works in an appropriate way from a client or user perspective.

3.3.3 Sub-study III:
Examining ICT use among young people outside education and employment

The third sub-study is empiric and the data for this research was collected from two training programs for young people outside education and employment. Both the youth attending the training programs and their supervisors were interviewed. McQuail's (1983) typology of individual motives for media use is based on a uses and gratification approach, and provided the analysis framework for the third sub-study. The typology is a helpful tool for categorizing the research data, and for identifying whether certain types of ICT use are dominant in this specific group of young people.

The young people featured in this study were considered as independent actors making their own choices concerning which available media they use, and therefore I decided to adopt a uses and gratification approach as a tool for the analysis of the data in this study. The theory suggests that users actively choose to use media which satisfies their personal needs and wishes, or fulfills other individual motives (Blumler and Katz 1974). My interpretation of the uses and gratification theory is that it is pragmatic and closely related with Dewey's ideas of learning, where he argues that people strongly rely on their earlier experiences when facing challenges and new situations.

The third sub-study makes a leap to the present time, examining how Finnish young adults who are at risk of being marginalized due to their lack of education and employment (potential social work clients), use ICT in their everyday life. The empirical research for sub-study III was conducted in January-April 2014. The results of the study show that these young adults use ICT primarily for entertainment, but that the usage itself was diverse. Some youth considered seeking information and learning about new things as entertaining, others preferred social media as entertainment and a third group used ICT as a more traditional entertainment for watching movies or listening to music. This reflects the developments that have occurred, and ICT and the virtual dimension it offers a gateway to, is now an important part of contemporary young adults lives. As clients are engaged in ICT and the virtual dimension, this inevitably affects the everyday practices among social work professionals. Reflecting on this from a social work research point of view, this sub-study contributes to research that explores "how the increasing use of ICT has filtered into social work practice in contrast to its uses as a direct treatment method" (Mishna et al. 2014).

An interesting example of this "filtering in to social work practice" (Mishna et al. 2014) occurred during the research interview with the supervisors of the training programs. The supervisors all had professional Facebook profiles which they used as a means for keeping in contact with their youth clients. However, they had started struggling with questions such as if and how they should remove ('un-friend') youth that had left the training programs from their group of Facebook friends, without hurting their feelings. At the time there were no official guidelines for the use of social media at the training programs and each of the supervisors applied their own strategies to how and when they un-friended former clients.

The ethical considerations I had to deal with in this sub-study were ones characteristic to social work research dealing with sensitive issues and vulnerable participants. As I prepared my research I met with two of the professional supervisors at the training programs. When discussing the study aims and what I might be interested in discussing with the youth attending the training programs, the supervisors asked me to avoid asking the young people about reasons why they did not attend school and were unemployed. This was a limitation when conducting the interviews, and I also felt that it would impact the analysis and results of my study. My solution to this problem was to use part of my interview with the supervisors to discuss the backgrounds of the youth attending the training program on a general level. This way I was able to get information that confirmed some of the intuitive thoughts about the problems the youth attending the training programs might experience, without asking about particular participants.

3.3.4 Sub-study IV: Mapping knowledge gaps in research on online support groups

The fourth sub-study is a review of research considering online support groups, including 76 publications spanning the period from 2003 to 2014. The review gives an overview of research from the past twelve years and evaluates its relevance to social work practice, looking at research considering moderated, supervised and peer operated online support groups. The focus is on the client perspective, thus leaving out support groups aimed at social- and health care professionals for education, supervision or personal development purposes. This sub-study aims at establishing whether there are detectable gaps or abundances in previous research.

This study was conducted in collaboration with post-doctoral researcher in social psychology, Vilma Lehtinen. In the sub-study we examine the research itself, and the scientific positioning and perspectives it takes, termed by Doise (1986) as the *levels* of analysis. The qualitative categorizing of the perspectives raised in studies on online support groups was inspired by Doise's (1986) categorization of the levels of analysis

in experimental social psychology. Doise makes distinctions between different levels of analysis to show that a comprehensive coverage and links between all levels are needed in order to fully understand social phenomena. Doise's categorization includes four levels: 1) the intra-personal level, 2) the inter-personal and situational level, 3) the positional level, and 4) the ideological level. By applying these levels of analysis as a framework, we aimed at distinguishing differences in the occurrence of research at distinct levels.

According to the review, it seems that during the last twelve years, researchers seem to have primarily engaged in examining online support groups focusing on either the individuals or the relations between individuals in the studied groups. The results of the review also indicate that there is a lack of research considering the interaction between professionals and clients. Still, the research reviewed in the sub-study shows that having a professional supervisor in an online support group might be beneficial to participants, as for example the professional supervision makes the participants more active and engaged in the group. The results of the review conducted in sub-study IV is of great relevance for this dissertation as it opens up a reflection on why previous research is so scarce and unevenly distributed. It also points at some possible benefits of implementing ICT in social work practice, but more studies are needed in all areas of research considering ICT and social work, if we are to build more extensive knowledge.

The sub-studies presented above describe how the entrance of the virtual dimension has influenced the way that people (especially young people) seek help and support. I have explored how (young) people use ICT as a tool for social support, participation and empowering bonding from four different angles. The focus in sub-studies I-III is on ICT in social work within the Finnish context, but as sub-study IV shows, this is also a more general phenomenon, and one that is scarcely studied among social work researchers. In the first sub-study, the focus was on (young) people seeking support through a private asynchronous online service. The second sub-study explored (young) people participating in a professionally moderated, and therefore asynchronous, discussion group. In the third sub-study I shifted context and interviewed young people offline, discussing their ICT use both in groups and individually. The fourth sub-study reviews previous research considering online support groups, focusing on what levels of interaction are emphasized in the studies. By combining the results of these four studies I have gained an extensive picture of the concepts of social support,

participation, and empowering bonding, and how they appear in the online setting. The (young) people in my research use the online dimension for solving problems and seeking support in difficult situations that occur offline, but they also appreciate opportunities to discuss challenging issues face to face.

The results of my four studies in this research show that people are simultaneously present in both an online and offline reality, and in our contemporary society, the youth especially live blended lives. This conclusion is similar to that of Castells (2010, xxxi), when he talks about "the culture of real virtuality" and aspects which make "virtuality a fundamental dimension of our reality". Turkle (2011, 157-162) defines this phenomenon with the concept "life mix" which is an expression of "the mash-up of what you have on- and offline". Even so, social work practice is still on many levels very face to face orientated. Social work has started using online tools and is moving towards a blended practice, but as discussed earlier in this summary article, social workers are still suspicious toward applying ICT in their client work. Reflecting on the current division and communication gap between social workers presented by Aila-Leena Matthies' (2013), this gap could to some extent be explained by the fact that public social work is still very much invisible in the online dimension. Therefore, increasing online information and communication could bring social workers and clients closer together.

4 Blended social work – a framework for exploring social work in digital transfer

Using my research process and the results of my sub-studies presented in the previous chapter as a starting point, I now turn to discussing the opportunities and risks of using ICT in social work practice. In this chapter I use both the global definition of social work approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and the Statement of Ethical Principles of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) as tools for reflection, when exploring social work practice in digital transfer.

According to the Statement of Ethical Principles of the IFSW, "Social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that enable them to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives". As people today increasingly populate the online world – in addition to leading life offline, more and more of both the public and personal features of everyday life are carried out partly or fully in online environments. Sub-studies II and III in this dissertation show that the online environment is an important arena for involvement and participation among young people. Sub-studies I and IV explore how people use online environments to seek advice and social support either privately or by attending online support group. Referring to the idea introduced by Jane Addams (see Chapter 1) one century ago, it is important that social workers settle among people in need. Transferring this to a present-day context, it is important that they are now present offering help and support in both online and offline environments. Considering the Ethical Principals of the IFSW, I argue that from a social work point of view, it would be unethical to ignore being present in either domain.

Figure 2   The online-offline overlap.

Figure 2 aims at describing the current situation in Finland, and shows how the online and offline dimensions overlap. The part on the left outside of the overlap

represents those people who are dependent on online services due to issues such as remote locations, difficulties accessing transportation, irregular working hours, or their disabilities. The part outside the overlap on the right represents those people who depend on offline services due to a lack of equipment and ICT skills. It is important to consider the two groups of people who remain outside the overlap when planning and developing social services, as these are the ones at risk of becoming marginalized due to the unequal opportunities they have to obtain the social services they might need. The sub-studies presented in this dissertation focus on the online dimension and its overlap with the offline world. Since the aim of this summary article is to take a look at the bigger picture, exploring how people operating solely either online or offline could be included in what happens in the blended zone is a key issue. Borrowing a concept from education science, I introduce *blended social work* as a framework for exploring and making sense of social work in a time of digital transfer, characterized by a simultaneous presence in both online and offline dimensions. Blended social work is not something that has been extracted from the results of the sub-studies. Instead, it is a framework that has developed during the research process (see Chapter 3.1). Blended social work has become a useful tool for me when I talk about and present my research among both social work practitioners and scholars. The concept functions as a framework which helps me situate the sub-studies into context; specifically at the intersection between social work and ICT, and continuously undergoing change and development.

Using blended social work as a framework for the research and development of new social work practices fits with a pragmatist philosophy, given that the framework has a built-in flexibility that applies to uncertain circumstances (e.g. Dewey 1938). Due to the emergence of the virtual dimension, the need for further development of social services and related research has again come to the fore. This need for development rises partly from clients and potential clients, as they are active users of ICT and therefore have expectations of being able to obtain information and services online. Partly, the need for development stems from the ongoing developments in society, such as extensive reforms in the social and healthcare sectors which include a transition to digital services as a key part of the process. As the experiences of utilizing ICT in social services still are quite limited, then a pragmatic approach including experimenting with blending digital tools with more traditional face to face practices is a good starting point for further development.

This chapter presents the main features of blended social work, including the benefits and challenges of blended practice. Some aspects of blended social work are borrowed from blended learning and applied directly to social work, while other aspects are adjusted, developed and re-invented to fit the context of social work practice. This chapter anchors the framework to social work, using the global definition of social work as a point of reference. In addition I use the results of my sub-studies as starting points when exploring how blended social work is realized through the concepts social support, participation and empowering bonding.

4.1 What is blended social work?

The definition of blended learning made by Garrison and Vaughan (2008) and its application to social work (making it blended social work) is presented in Table 2. As presented here, blended social work is an idea or a model for practice, and does not go into technical details when it comes to realizing online services. Discussing specific technologies (such as hardware and software) might not be fruitful at this stage, since the rate of development in this area is so fast (Jones 2014) that it is likely to supersede any proposals made at this juncture. Blended social work is a continuum between face to face practice and online practice, with blended practice being presented as a mobile interface.

Blended learning	Blended social work
(Garrison & Vaughan 2008)	
– Thoughtfully integrating face-to-face and online learning	– Thoughtfully integrating face-to-face and online social work
– Fundamentally rethinking the course design to optimize student engagement	– Fundamentally rethinking social work practice to optimize client engagement
– Restructuring and replacing traditional class contact hours	– Restructuring social work to enhance socially shared and open information

Table 2   Defining blended learning vs. blended social work.

Blended social work is defined as social work that thoughtfully integrates online and face to face practices by creatively considering the foundation of the practice and reorganizing traditional contact, considering the needs and preconditions of the client. Blended social work promotes a practice-led and user centered approach to ICT. The use of tools for enhancing practice is flexible in blended social work, and in some cases a consideration of the preconditions of the client may in fact lead to using exclusively offline tools (case A in figure 3). Another case might start out using offline

tools but progress to include online tools as the contact between social worker and client develops (case B in figure 3). A third case might start with online contact and then gradually include offline practices (case C in figure 3). A fourth alternative is to work with a client exclusively in an online environment (case D in figure 3). In cases B and C, the practices may vary during the period that the social worker and client are involved, bouncing back and forth between offline and online practices. In all of these four situations however, the social worker needs to consider the consequences of the actions that are taken, when choosing a certain mode of practice. This way of thoughtfully integrating online and offline practices by considering the consequences relates to pragmatism, where according to Dewey (1931) the consequences of human actions guided by purpose and knowledge is (a desired) change. Considering the thoughtful integration of online and offline practice as action in this pragmatic sense, requires the social worker to constant reflection of the clients' situations and of what mode of practice might give the best result, for the time being. But it also requires a flexibility to change the mode of practice whenever there is a development in the circumstances of the client.
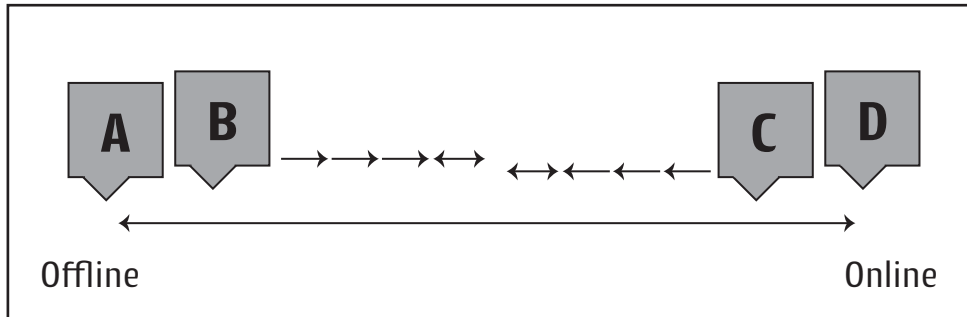
Figure 3   Four modes of working with cases when implementin blended social work.

Blended social work includes restructuring social work to enhance socially shared information. This means acknowledging the knowledge and expertise that clients might possess through information found online, and through their (online) interaction with peers and social- and health care professionals (Radin 2006). This turns to become shared knowledge, and leads to a more open expertise in line with

the epistemology of pragmatism, and which does not perceive scientific knowledge as superior to lay knowledge, but as Brown (2012: 262) when exploring Dewey's logic of science states, knowledge is to be considered a continuum.

Blended learning aims at improving education by combining the best of both online and face to face learning, but when viewing this from an opposite perspective, blended learning also combines the disadvantages of both types of learning (Graham 2006; 2009). Giving students the more freedom as to when and how to complete online tasks might lead to more difficulties with time management (Aycock et al. 2002; Kaleta et al. 2007; Senn 2008). The online environment enables sharing more information with students, which can make courses more demanding and the learning less efficient (Graham & Robinson 2007). Reflecting on what consequences these challenges found with blended learning could have for blended social work, the obvious issue is that bombarding the clients with too much information or too many options when combining face to face with online practices, might be confusing. Social work clients often experience severe enough situations as it is, and giving out plenty of information and offering many options may in fact be unhelpful and increase the clients' burden. Looking at this from a social workers point of view, sharing information in two dimensions and ensuring that the client has received and understood it correctly increases their workload.

Hitherto, blended social work has been explored by comparing it to blended learning and using educational science as a point of reference. In an attempt to strengthen the establishment of this framing concept with social work, I turn to reflect on how blended social work relates to the global definition of social work. The most recent version of the global definition of social work was approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) General Meeting and by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) General Assembly in July 2014. The current version states:

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels".

<div align="right">(http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/)</div>

The definition above is not very specific, and as such might be considered as empty words. But it is still worthy of some attention as it is what the international community has agreed upon to represent what it feels is worth pursuing in social work practice. Interpreted in the light of the global definition of social work, blended social work could be defined as follows: *Blended social work promotes the practice-led implementation of ICT in social work as a means to enhance social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Equal rights to an easily accessible, responsibly delivered service with respect for diversity are central principals in blended practice. Blended social work enhances wellbeing by engaging clients and addressing their life challenges on a level appropriate to their individual needs and resources.*

Definitions, like the global definition of social work, emphasize aims that help people cope under changing circumstances, but the means for these aims are not discussed. Implementing ICT in social work practice gives rise to many as yet untapped opportunities, but there are also challenges that have to be considered when using ICT in the humane professions. Promoting *social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people* in practice includes making decisions that involve ethical judgements, and social workers are often forced to make choices that will have consequences on their clients' lives.

4.2 Ethically sustainable social work –
   opportunities and risks of blended practice

This section discusses the opportunities and risks of blended practice, applying an ethical point of view on social work in the virtual dimension. Blended social work implies flexibility and allows social workers and clients the freedom to choose the most favorable mode of practice. This flexibility entails both opportunities and risks for practice, and there are aspects that have to be carefully considered when working in the blended mode to maintain consistent ethical standards of social work practice.

As previously mentioned, the power-relationship between the social worker and client is not symmetric (Matthies 2013). In order to guide social work practice there are professional codes of ethics, which comprise of general value-based statements of principals. These have a varying degree of enforceability in different countries. In Finland, the Talentia Union of Professional Social Workers (www.talentia.fi) is responsible for the code of ethics, and they serve as recommendations and guidelines for practice. The Finnish guidelines are based on the international approved Statement of Ethical Principles given by the IFSW. The core values of social work that are included in most value related texts are: Respect for the person, self-determination, confidentiality, social justice, human rights, professional integrity, non-discrimination and cultural competence (Congress 2010). Neither the international nor the Finnish ethical guidelines notice social work in online environments, although the National Association of Social Workers together with the Association of Social Work Boards (2005) in the US has published Standards for technology and social work practice. These standards were introduced in 2005, and as has been pointed out earlier in this summary dissertation, during the last ten years technological development has been rapid, and therefore these standards are in need of updating.

ICT is an important tool for participation and self-determination in the Finnish society of today, therefore by promoting digital inclusion and diminishing the digital divide, social work could aim for a more equal society (e.g. Kuilema 2012). When planning and implementing digital services it is important to consider the available knowledge about ICT use among clients and potential clients, due to the ethical consequences that unequal digital participation might have, and also so as to ensure equal access to social services for all citizens.

Besides acknowledging the challenges that the transfer to digital services brings to social work practice, it is also important to observe the opportunities. Implementing ICT in social work practice makes the services more flexible. People who live in remote locations without access to transportation, or are homebound due to disabilities can both reach and be reached by social workers through ICT. Clients who prefer writing to spoken communication, or due to limiting disabilities may also benefit from online services (Barak & Gohol 2011; Brownlee, Graham, Doucette, Hotson & Halverson 2010).

Using the core values of social work (respect for the person, self-determination, confidentiality, social justice, human rights, professional integrity, non-discrimination

and cultural competence) as a lens when exploring social work in digital transfer can be a way of defining an ethically sustainable use of ICT in social work practice. These core values can be used as a starting point, and a tool when reflecting on whether or not a client would benefit from blended practice. Considering issues of respect for the person and self-determination when implementing ICT in social work practice raises the discussion of giving clients the freedom of choice when they are either seeking information or making contact with social services. Recent research (Best et al. 2014) has shown that the internet is a popular channel for retrieving health information, especially among young men. Therefore clients and potential clients would benefit from having such information available in an easily accessible way. Assuring access to information is of primary importance, regardless of potential issues of access to ICT literacy skills or disabilities. Also, using sound, pictures or short movie-clips in addition to text is recommended when sharing information through ICT, as it provides an alternative means of receiving information. Offering clients the opportunity to attend to their business online can be viewed as an example of respecting the client and his/her right to self-determination, as well offering offline services to clients who either do not have online access, are not skilled enough, or simply prefer not to use online services. Making sure that basic services are equally reachable for all clients (including those who prefer the offline dimension) is an important consideration when planning digital services.

The importance of confidentiality in social work practice has been briefly discussed in the introduction to this summary dissertation (see Chapter 1). Confidentiality-gaps in social work are considered as risks for sensitive information to leak out to third parties, causing harm to the clients. Using open access software when communicating with clients can be considered to pose such a confidentiality-gap. Ensuring data security is important for ethically sustainable social work practice in online environments. On the other hand, offering clients the opportunity to initiate contact with social workers anonymously using ICT can be considered enhancement of confidentiality. Social workers are responsible for informing their clients of any service limitations (Dombo et.al. 2014). Thus, social work professionals have to make sure that their clients are aware of the nature of an online tool, in order to prevent them from disclosing too much about themselves in an online discussion group or service that is openly available to others.

At the end of the last millennium, Kofi Annan (1999), the seventh Secretary General of the United Nations, stated:

> *"People lack many things: jobs, shelter, food, health care, and drinkable water. Today, being cut off from basic telecommunications services is a hardship almost as acute as these other deprivations, and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them. Telecommunications is not just an issue for the telecommunications minister of each country, but for ministers of education, health and many others".*

This observation is still relevant and very true. In a report from the Human Rights Council of the United Nations General Assembly (LaRue 2011), internet access was defined as a human right. The internet enables people to freely express their opinions and it facilitates the realization of other rights such as social rights. Building and participating in social networks online enables people with common interests join together both locally and globally, to share their experiences, and to advocate change (Giffords 2009). Discussions about whether or not social workers are responsible to advocate online inclusion and work in favor for internet access among clients have been initiated (Kuilema 2012). Especially, the connection between social exclusion and digital exclusion has been discussed and noted by several researchers (e.g. Kuilema 2012; Steyaert & Gould 2009). Referring to the statement made by Kofi Annan above, "telecommunications is not just an issue for the telecommunications minister of each country, but for ministers of education, health and many others", these "many others" could also include social workers. Viewing the inequality issues connected to the digital divide from a human rights and social justice perspective I argue that ethically sustainable social work and blended practice implies advocating for the digital inclusion of all people.

For social workers the value of professional integrity indicates that the there are certain expectations towards how they conduct themselves as professionals (Congress 2010). These expectations are connected to the ethical codes of practice. In terms of blended practice, the importance of keeping up a sufficient level of knowledge considering both online and offline methods of intervention and practice can be considered as part of this professional integrity (Dombo et al. 2014). Social workers practicing in the online environment need to inform clients about the character of the service so that they may choose the right level of disclosure when communicating with the professional online (ibid.). Another issue that might apply to social workers in times of blended practice

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concerned their professional integrity and their appearance on social media and other online forums. As Dombo et al. (2014) argues, the question is not whether or not social workers should be present in the online sphere, but rather how they should engage in social media and represent themselves in the online dimension. This means being aware and thoughtful of their digital presence, and possibly use an alternative name for their personal presence online.

As a result of globalization processes, the world is experiencing more diversified societies, including people from different cultures, with diverse backgrounds and different prospects in life (e.g. Chambon 2013; Payne & Askeland 2008). This diversity challenges social workers to endeavor to adopt a stronger non-discrimination approach and cultural competence in their practice, especially when offering services to migrants and refugees. The imbalance in power between the client and social worker could be reinforced through misunderstandings due to cultural differences. It is important for social workers applying blended practices to be aware of how possible cultural differences may effect upon communication when it is mediated by way of ICT. The online dimension can on the other hand offer a more equal and less discriminating environment, as communication can be carried out facelessly, or in some cases in total anonymity. Therefore a blended approach could be very useful when upholding the values of non-discrimination and cultural competence in social work.

4.3 Enhancing participation, social support and empowering bonding through blended social work

Blended social work aims at offering easily accessible services. Providing online services might lower the threshold for clients to initiate contact, and as the results of sub-studies I, II and IV have shown, it seems to be easier for some to talk about sensitive topics online, rather than face to face. The individual university students who were under scrutiny in sub-study I, felt that the private online Virtual Shoulder service provided them with an easily accessible source of social support. Disclosing issues anonymously online might lower the threshold and make it easier to talk to someone face to face. As Turkle (1997, 26) points out, the virtual dimension can function as an

arena where people can practice sharing their more intimate thoughts and feelings, which applies especially to the socially marginalized participants who were the subjects of my featured studies. For socially integrated people, professional support in a virtual dimension can offer a channel where they may open up to someone neutral, who is outside their immediate circle of friends and relatives, and enable them get an another view on a problem they face. These results are in line with the conclusions of Ketokivi (2008; 2009), who draws from her research on help-seeking strategies among people experiencing an acute crisis.

Mutual social support was highlighted as an important feature among the lonely young people participating in the discussion group explored in sub-study II, and in sub-study IV social support was used as one of the framing concepts of the literature review. The support offered in the online dimension either through discussion groups, chat groups, or groups on online media platforms are different from that available to groups in offline settings. The results of sub-studies (I and II) reveal that for young people, seeking online social support either privately or in a group setting is easier than seeking support offline, and a reason for this might be the constant availability and easy access of online resources. The results of sub-study II also underlines the importance and positive effects that public online discussion groups can have on people in need of support. In the study, many of the participants in the discussion groups expressed having followed the discussion for a while and finding it helpful, prior to entering the discussion themselves.

In their article, Rossi and Tognetti Bordogna (2014) discuss different experiences concerning online mutual help among people with long-term chronic conditions. Online support, especially when occurring on social media sites or other synchronous services, is available 24/7, independent of physical place, while support in offline settings is available only at a certain place and at an agreed date and time. Due to the non-dependence on a physical setting in the online dimension, there are no limits as to how many people can participate in a group. On the other hand, as the online dimension is flexible, it is easy to form smaller, closed groups for specific topics of discussion within larger online communities. Offline groups are often more consistent than online ones, as they mostly include specific people who are committed to meeting regularly for a certain period of time. More loosely built support groups also exist in offline settings (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous groups) where

the time and place is set, but the participants do not commit to attending the same group and therefore it can be differently composed each time it meets.

The results of sub-studies I, II and IV show that online groups provide excellent arenas for sharing experiences, discussing and seeking solutions to common situations and problems, and also for mutual support. Online peer support has its benefits, but according to research, online support groups supervised by a professional have some considerable advantages when compared to groups consisting of peers only, as participants seem to be more committed and less likely to make threats of suicide (Gilat & Sharar 2007; Klemm 2012). Sub-study II also found that having a professional moderator and supervisor in the group makes the discussion more focused and prevents inappropriate posts and insults. The fact that online support groups are easy to access and people feel it is easy to disclose on virtual arenas also entails a risk of saying too much too soon, and on the wrong forum. It is therefore important that social work practitioners keep their clients informed of the character of the service and any risks that using it might involve.

Smartphones have made the virtual world and online participation constantly available through the gadgets we carry with us in our pockets. Sub-study III (see also Turkle 2011) found that moving smoothly between online and offline dimensions, blending them and living in both simultaneously is characteristic for contemporary young people. Social media in particular offers both private and public persons a new way to participate. Through social media, family news, new ideas and current trends are shared. Sub-study II discusses online discussion groups as a means for young people suffering from loneliness to express themselves and participate. In sub-study III, ICT is considered as a tool for participation among young people in general. The third sub-study discusses the importance of flexibility when developing services aimed at youth, as they are a very heterogeneous group of people. The results of sub-study III also indicate that even young people in vulnerable positions consider their ICT use carefully, and it seems that they are well aware of the risks that exist in the online dimension. Some youth prefer ICT applications, whilst others choose more traditional tools for participation. Recent studies show that younger youth strongly prefer to use synchronous tools for participation and interaction, while young adults tend to interact and participate using more mixed approaches (Taipale 2015). Synchronous services such as instant messaging and sharing of content is closely related to the emergence of social media, and as a result, the research in this area does not span over more than

10 years. Hence, there is no research on whether or how the use of ICT might change when the living conditions of young people change due to e.g. increased work and family responsibilities. The challenge for future social and youth services is therefore to keep track of where young people "hang out", and to be present in both dimensions.

There are situations where people need support from people outside their inner circles of relatives and friends. Sometimes when experiencing something very difficult, people feel more comfortable disclosing to a stranger experiencing a similar situation, rather than to a relative or friend (sub-study I; see also Hård af Segerstad & Kasperowski 2015), and in some situations people also feel the need to confide in a professional. These situations exemplify what Ketokivi (2008) defines as the need for empowering bonding. In such situations, ICT can be an alternative mode for interaction. Applying a blended mode of practice is therefore not just about choosing or promoting either the online or offline environment in social work, but combining both, with a focus on the needs and circumstances of the client.

5 Discussion

The aim of this research has been to investigate and map the intersection of ICT and social work. The map begins to take shape thanks to the slowly growing interest in developing research and practice in this area, but it still has its blind spots of 'no-man's land' for future explorers to discover. What I have found is that as a mediator of information in the context of social work, ICT has many contradictory effects as on one hand it offers new arenas and tools for practice, but on the other it also provides potential tools for control. In this dissertation, opening alternative ways for clients to communicate with social workers, and also the power of peer support are examples of opportunities ICT can bring to social work practice. The risks of ICT mediated communication in social work have been touched upon are the reduction in human contact and an increase in elements of surveillance and control, and in this context, social workers might exercise superior control and clients might become subject to the professional control of their social workers. Another concern in times of digital transfer is the availability of services. Basic services should be equally available for all people, independent of mode, and in online or offline contexts that suit the client's needs and preferences. Referring to John Dewey (1916), my thought is that the new technologies we have at hand are not to be considered and used as tools for control, or as merely as tools for achieving certain outcomes. Instead, embracing a pragmatic approach, we could benefit from experimenting with integrating these new technologies into everyday actions and relationships, as part of social work practice (Ibid).

"All I'm offering is the truth, nothing more" says Morpheus to Neo in the same scene where he gives his "The Matrix is everywhere" speech which is quoted at the beginning of this dissertation (Prologue). In this scene of the movie, Neo is made to choose between a blue or red pill. Taking the blue one will bring him back to the life he had lead before meeting with Morpheus, a life where he was not aware of The Matrix. Choosing the red pill will make him a part of the group of enlightened people, those who fight the machines which make people slaves to The Matrix. The truth that Morpheus is offering Neo could be interpreted as the awareness of two simultaneously existing and interwoven dimensions, the online and the offline, where actions in one dimension affect the other. For example, in the movie, if you get physically hurt while in The Matrix, you are also wounded outside of it. So "the truth" (and knowledge) that I have extracted from the sub-studies presented in this dissertation is that we need to be aware of the 'blendedness' of life, and that the two online and offline dimensions are inseparable and have a continuously effect on us. In the sub-studies, the concepts

of social support, participation and empowering bonding are examples of how people's online experiences can affect their lives in the offline dimension.

Advocating digital participation and democracy among clients, as well as strengthening their social capacity and social bonds in the virtual dimension, and enhancing employment and financial autonomy through online networks should be included in contemporary social work practice. Against the current backdrop of global uncertainty, including issues of economic recession, threats of terrorism, and natural disasters, it seems that every available measure should be considered and put into use, in order to minimize the exclusion of people or groups.

One example of the current global uncertainty is the evolving refugee situation, and due to uncertain circumstances, many people have had to leave their home countries and families behind. For these people, ICT can function as a means to give and receive social support, and to maintain social relationships both with relatives and friends back home, and to connect with relatives, friends and compatriots living in their new home environment. ICT offers refugees and migrants a means for keeping up to date with what is happening in both the local and global environments. When people are aware of what is going on, they are able to participate and take action. ICT also help refugees and migrants with integrating in to their new home environment, and functions as a channel for exploring the culture and habits of their new home country. Therefore it is important to provide these people with the appropriate equipment, and to also educate them in the use of virtual tools. Helping and supporting people looking to start 'new lives' in safer environments is currently as much of a challenge for social workers in Finland as it is in many other Western-European and North-American countries.

Furthermore, on national Finnish level, the social and health care sector is currently undergoing two major reforms. The first reform regards the payment of income support, making the Social Insurance Institution of Finland responsible for the application process and payment of income support, and will be realized in 2017. This reform involves digitalization of the application process for income support, which indicates that prospective clients are trusted to be equipped and skilled well enough to be able to fill in and submit their applications online. The other reform concerns the merging of social and health care services and introducing 19 Sote-districts in Finland, and also suggest digitalization and the effective use of ICT as a measure for future practice. Both reforms rely on the assumption that Finnish people are equipped, skilled and motivated to use ICT when dealing with social and health care

services, either in the professional or client role. However, knowing that there is an inherent resistance among social workers to implement ICT in their practice, and acknowledging that the most marginalized people often those who lack skills and proper equipment, then introducing sudden changes relying solely on digital modes of communication seem like an impossible mission. Therefore the solution is not for social workers to sit and wait for what will come, but to take action, and together with their clients look to develop their own ways of implementing blended practices, so as to avoid being forced to use tools and practices which are dictated from above.

What Finnish social workers need to be able to deal with the current global and national challenges is education. The universities offering education in social work would benefit from including courses that address the implementation of ICT in social work practice. Furthermore, professional social workers involved in everyday practice need training and education in how to implement new digital tools. These professionals also need to be educated in how to support clients who are less skilled, but who would benefit from being able to utilize the virtual dimension as a mode for managing their affairs with social services. Overall education should focus on training social workers in coping with uncertain and developing circumstances. Here using pragmatism as a framework could be fruitful, due to its orientation toward the future and "not yet realized world" (Goldkuhl 2012:140).

Finally, when turning to an evaluation of the validity of my research, I once again choose to refer to the sci-fi movie The Matrix. In the episode from the film described above, Morpheus has two pills to offer, one that reveals the existence of a second dimension to life, and one that makes you go back to life as it was and forget you were ever given the choice of the two pills. My interpretation of this episode is that there is more than one truth and at least two sides to every story, and the choices you make along the road affect what you see as the truth. During a research process that has lasted nine years, I have made many different choices. I have chosen to collect qualitative data in the online and the offline context, and I have chosen qualitative method of analysis. I have chosen to write my reports in English and publish them in certain academic publications. Some of the choices have been made consciously and others more by accident, some have been made intuitively and others made with coercion. The interest in gaining more knowledge about how (young) people utilize the online dimension when experiencing difficulties in life has acted as a guiding star through every phase of my research, and my aim has been to use this knowledge

to reflect on what consequences, opportunities and risks this new dimension might bring to social work practice. The research results presented in this dissertation are but one side of the story, and the sum of the choices I have made. I would like to think, that by choosing the red pill, I have been able to open up a window of awareness in the field of social work research, which we may use to acknowledge both the risks and opportunities that the blendedness of our current lives brings, especially when we discuss the realization of equality and self-determination within both online and offline dimensions.

This dissertation introduces blended social work as a framework for exploring the current situation considering the implementation of ICT in social work practice. I leave blended social work open for further development and study, and there are still many unanswered questions considering the interconnectedness of ICT and social work in emergent practice of future generations. Without diminishing the need for further scientific knowledge on the current situation, and also how an aging generation adapts to using virtual services, I suggest that the focus of future research should be on determining the expectations of the next generation. How do prospective social workers (social work students) picture future social work practice? What kinds of services might future clients want? Another hot topic for prospective research is the role of ICT in the process of integrating migrants and refugees into their new home countries. Future research and the development of blended social work practice would thus benefit from a transformative approach like practice or action oriented research, where a blend of student, professional and service user experiences and expertise in social work is used to plan and develop future knowledge.

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1 Social support and empowering bonding in supporting online environments

Translation of the article: *Virtuaalinen auttamisympäristö voimaannuttavan vuorovaikutuksen ja sosiaalisen tuen tarjoajana* (2010) first published in Pohjola, A., Kääriäinen, A. & Kuusisto-Niemi, S. (eds) Sosiaalityö, tieto ja teknologia. *(Social work, Knowledge and Technology. The Yearbook of the Finnish Society of Social Work Research).* Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus.

Camilla Granholm

Receiving virtual support on the internet

The internet, virtual socializing, and professional and peer support offered in online environments have been of interest to researchers as long as these environments have existed. In the US, research on people's online behavior has been carried out for over twenty years (e.g. Turkle 2005/1984; Behar 1997; Wallace 1999; Bell 2007). In Finland most internet-related research has considered subject areas such as communication studies, information technology, and also education science (e.g. Korhonen 2003; Vainionpää 2006; Oesch 2007; Syrjäkari 2007). However, the lack of research knowledge in the area of social work might be a reason for why the internet is still sparsely used within public sector helping professions.

Finns are frequent internet users. A report on a study made by the Statistics Finland in spring 2008 *(Internetin käytön muutokset. Tieto- ja viestintätekniikan käyttö 2008 -tutkimuksen tuloksia)* showed that 83 per cent of all Finns aged 16–74 had used the internet during the last three months. According to the same report, 66 per cent of the population aged 16–74 use the internet on a daily bases. The study also shows that 62 per cent of those who used the internet had been searching for health, illness and diet information.

This article examines a selection of messages written to the Virtual Shoulder, an online service provided by the registered association Nyyti. Nyyti develops and produces services that promote mental well-being among students at Finnish universities and art academies. The method used for analyzing these messages follows the principles of qualitative content analysis. The inductive examination of the data resulted in

choosing university students' loneliness, social relations and social support as the main topics of this research. These topics were uncovered early in the research process and subsequently became the framing theoretical concepts that were used when exploring the research data. The aim of the research is to contribute new knowledge and highlight the challenges and opportunities of online supportive environments. In addition, the research looks to initiate a discussion on how virtual environments could be utilized in public and professional, social and health care.

The following section gives a presentation of the Virtual Shoulder service and its clients. Then I will go over to discussing the ethical challenges of using the internet for data collection. After presenting the key concepts of the research, I will give an overview of the research material and the analysis, followed by the results of the research. The article ends with a discussion and a presentation of conclusions made from the research.

Log in – background data about the Virtual Shoulder service and its clients

The Virtual shoulder is a service offered by Nyyti, a registered association aiming at promoting the mental well-being and life management skills among students at Finnish universities and art academies. The Virtual shoulder was established in 1992 and first operated through e-mail. Since 2003 The Virtual Shoulder has worked as a web-based service system, open 24/7. After registering as a user and logging in, the client can write and send a message to the Virtual Shoulder, and will get a reply within two weeks. The registration requires entering some general background information, such as the user's year of birth, year of initiating their studies at the university, the orientation of study and the place of study.

All messages posted to the Virtual Shoulder are private and confidential. They are only read by the employees and the volunteer placed in charge of answering the message. The employees read all incoming messages. Messages in need of urgent reply are answered by the employees. Messages are considered urgent for example if the person writing is expressing suicidal thoughts. Less urgent messages are answered by volunteers in co-operation with the service's employees.

The data for the research described in this article consists of 43 messages[8] selected from

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8   The research data is the same as used for my master's thesis, but the analysis of the data is completely different.

archived messages which have been written to the Virtual Shoulder. The messages were all posted in 2005, and during this year the Virtual Shoulder received messages from 569 different clients. The largest proportion (77 per cent of the clients) wrote to the service once, 12.5 per cent wrote two messages and 7.2 per cent wrote three to five messages. Only 3.3 per cent of the clients wrote more than five messages. During this period, the Virtual Shoulder received a total of 825 messages. Three quarters of the clients were women and one quarter men. In 94 per cent of the cases the city where the client was studying was identifiable, and relative to this information, 51 per cent of the clients were studying in the Helsinki region and 49 per cent in other parts of Finland.

Two conditions were imposed when selecting the messages: firstly the messages had to be the students' first contacts with the Virtual Shoulder, and secondly the students' had to express feelings of stress, exhaustion and/or depression in all of the selected messages. The main concerns expressed by the client are noted by the person answering the message. In order to make the notation of the client's main concerns easier, there is a list of codes prepared by the service for concerns that may come up. This listing includes a total of different 20 codes[9]. For a long period and also at the time of data collection, stress, exhaustion and/or depression was the most common concern expressed by clients (Granholm 2006).

The messages show that the clients include undergraduate and graduate students, and that the age range among the clients is relatively wide. Some of the clients are young students just beginning their studies straight after high school, and others are more mature students studying for a second degree. These clients are presumed to be linked by their university studies. However, the Virtual Shoulder can receive messages from those other than university students as the background information given by clients on

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9   The list of codes used when noting the main concerns: 1. Stress, exhaustion, depression, 2. Anxiety, growth crises (feeling everything is not all right, fear, self-esteem), panic, 3. Tension, 4. Romantic relationship, dating, 5. Social relationships (close ones, family, other social relation ships, the client is in contact on behalf of a close one or a friend), 6. Loneliness, feeling lonely, 7. Sexuality: identity, problems and contacts considering sex, 8. Lacking life management skills which affects the studies, 9. Problems with mental well-being (the client talks about a diag nosed mental illness, or it becomes apparent to the employee/volunteer through the message), 10. Suicide threat or self-destructiveness (such as cutting), 11. Eating disorders, 12. A shocking event (real or unreal), 13. Financial worries (unemployment, taxes, housing), 14. Substance use, alcohol, drugs, 15. News about the current situation in life, health, illness or treatment of it (for example clients in treatment or waiting in line for treatment at the Student Health Services), 16. Not in use, 17. Asking for information about Nyyti and its services or giving feedback on the services, 18. Particular questions considering studies or need of study guidance, 19. Not in use, 20. Asking for other advice.

registration is not checked or confirmed in any way. Now and then there are incoming messages, in which the client admits to not being a university student. In cases like these the clients are given an answer, but are also directed to a service that is more appropriate for their needs, such as Tukinet (organized by The Finnish Association for Mental Health), the online service for children and youth organized by The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, or the Youth Crises Center organized by the Helsinki Mission.

The ethical challenges of collecting data on the internet

Basic research ethics include a respect for autonomy and human value. Research should not course harm to any of the participants and the privacy of the informants should be guaranteed. These basic principles, together with legislation concerning research ethics should be applied in internet research, just as in any other kind of research. Using the internet for information and data collection can be ethically challenging. It is impossible to make any generally applicable standards for internet research. Concepts like place, reality, and private and public can be difficult to define on the internet, and the way the internet is used and the content of the internet are not consistent. The internet is global, and people regard and interpret the information available on the internet from their own cultural perspectives. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has developed a set of ethical guidelines for use in internet research (Kuula 2006, 192–195).

The data used in this research was shared by Nyyti. The organization gave their consent to my research, and it has been conducted under their constant supervision, and following the ethical guidelines set out by the organization. These ethical guidelines include a passage mentioning that messages written to the virtual service can be used for research purposes, but only without disclosing any background information or details that could lead to compromising the confidentiality or revealing the identity of a client *(Nyytin toimintaperiaatteet* [Nyyti guidelines for practice] www.nyyti.fi) Every client who registers with the online services at nyyti.fi are asked to read and consent to the guidelines of the service, including giving consent for the use of their messages for research purposes. There is, however no way of checking if the clients really read and understand the content of the guidelines, as the clients are not asked in any way (even by checking a box) to show that they have read the guidelines.

While writing this article I considered inserting excerpts from the research data. In the first draft of this article I used excerpts, and in this matter the guidelines of Nyyti are, in my opinion, ambiguous. I presented my text to Nyyti and asked for their opinions. There were voices raised both for and against using the message excerpts. So, I was torn between the options I faced: On one hand using excerpts would increase the reliability of my research and I felt that quoting the messages would enliven the text. On the other hand, I was concerned about what would happen if one of the students read my article and saw that her or his message was quoted in it. Would the student feel disappointed and betrayed by Nyyti? Also, I was concerned as to the kind of impact an incident like this would have on the credibility and trustworthiness of Nyyti as an association.

When contemplating this ethical decision, I became familiar with an article written by Malin Sveningsson Elm (2009) *How Do Various Notions of Privacy Influence Decisions in Qualitative Internet Research?*. She had been part of the process of writing the first set of AoIR Ethics guidelines, and in this article she discusses data collection on the internet and the need for signed consent from the people that are under observation.

According to the AoIR guidelines there is no need for signed consent if the environment, where the research takes place is public, and if the data collected is not considered as sensitive. Sveningsson Elm (2009) reflects on which internet environments could be categorized as public and which as private. Public environments are environments that anyone with an internet connection can access. Environments which are basically open to anyone but require membership and registration are considered semipublic. For example, Facebook (www.facebook) is an example of a semipublic environment. Semiprivate environments are those which are open to a certain group of people. These environments require membership and registration, but also belonging to the community that has developed the environment. The intranet pages of companies or organizations are an example of semiprivate environments situated on the internet. Private online environments are closed to most people, or are open to a group selected or approved by the person who has created the environment. Personal web-pages or their parts that are defined as private are examples of private online environments (Sveningsson Elm 2009).

After considering the guidelines given by Sveningsson Elm (2009, 74–74), I decide that it would not be ethically appropriate to publish quotations taken from the students' messages without asking for their signed consent. After registering as a user,

the Nyyti Virtual Shoulder is a private environment and the messages written to the service are therefore to be considered as sensitive. As the background information of the students, including the nicknames those behind the messages had adopted were unknown to me, it would have been impossible to find the information needed to get in contact with them. Thus, after these ethical reflections I decided to present my research results without citing the students' messages. However, I describe the messages accurately in my own words but keep the anonymity of the writer as a first priority.

About loneliness and social support in online and off-line environments

The aftermath of two recent school shooting incidents in Finland has raised a media debate about how the internet influences young people and their social behavior. The internet is an easy scapegoat and there have been arguments explaining the tragic events as reflections of the negative effects of the internet. The public debate easily leaves you with an impression that the internet is a meeting place for lonely, mentally ill and marginalized youth.

As previously mentioned, loneliness and social marginalization is often associated with the use of the internet, although research results on this matter are contradictory. A longitudinal study done in the US in the late 1990s proves that continuous use of the internet can result in social marginalization (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay & Scherlis 1998). This research has however been criticized for not considering the different personalities among internet users, and that people use the internet for different purposes (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi 2003). Therefore it is assumably not correct to generalize the impact of the internet on people's well-being by saying that internet use results in loneliness and social marginalization. More recent research shows that these previous results can at least partly be explained by the fact that people experiencing loneliness in their off-line lives, are more frequent users of the internet than those who don't experience loneliness off-line (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi 2003).

There has also been some debate about whether people will become even more isolated in the off-line world, as more and more the internet replaces face-to-face socializing and communication. The results of research on internet use among young people shows that the internet is not used as an alternative to face-to-face contact, but more as a

compliment to face-to-face contact and other communication. When young people hang out on the internet, it is most often with people they know from other face-to-face-contexts such as in their school or hobbies (Sperring 2004; Thulin 2004; Living and Learning with New Media 2008).

Loneliness and social support are the key concepts of this study. These concepts frame the study and also form the theoretical background for this project. Loneliness as a concept is not easy to explain and it has multiple definitions. Kaarina Laine (Laine 2005, 163) has examined and gathered together different definitions of loneliness. According to Laine, loneliness can be defined as a subjective experience including a dissatisfaction with existing social relationships or simply a lack of them. Laine defines two types of loneliness: emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness is something which an individual experiences due to the lack of a permanent intimate relationship to a significant other. Social loneliness has more to do with a general lack of friends and a social network. Loneliness is an overwhelming and anguished emotion that can't be observed from the outside. Experiences of loneliness often occur among youth and young adults, and it is connected to becoming independent, leaving the childhood family, and to the development of an individual identity. Experiences of loneliness among teens and young adults can also be connected with unrealistically high expectations of social relationships, and of social life in general (Laine 2005, 170).

Loneliness is an issue that came up in the Student Health Survey 2008 carried out by Kristiina Kunttu and Teppo Huttunen (2009). The results of the study on health and well-being among Finnish university students show that over five per cent of the respondents often experienced feelings of loneliness. These students stated that they meet friends less than once a month, and that they also experienced they were lacking opportunities to share and discuss the things going on in their life with relatives or other close ones. The study also shows that only 55 per cent of the students felt that they belonged to a study-related group. The concept of a study-related group was defined very widely and included class and seminar groups, and student associations. One third of the students stated that they didn't feel that they belonged to any of these groups. These results by Kunttu and Huttunen indicate that there are very lonely individuals among the Finnish university students. The results also point out that these university students feel that the study environment at universities offers a limited amount, and relatively poor socially supportive networks.

Like loneliness, social support is a multidimensional concept with many different definitions. Sidney Cobbs' (1976, 300) classical definition of social support states that it is information that gives an individual a feeling of being loved and honored, and feeling part of a reciprocal social network. Social support can also be viewed as an asset which is received from other human beings (Cohen & Syme 1985, 4). In addition, social support is also defined as the emotional, material, informative and evaluative help and support gained through social relationships and human interaction (Heaney & Israel 1997). In other words, social support can consist of emotional support, appreciation, informative and practical support (House, Kahn, Mac Leod & Williams 1985, 101).

In regard to the effects of social support, features like the different dimensions of social support have to be taken under consideration. Such features are the quantity and quality of social support, the amount of social support that is available, and the resources of social support that can be mobilized in a crisis situation. A reduction in the social support that is available has a negative effect on an individual's mental well-being (Cornwell 2003). One could assume that a reduction in the social support that is available happens, at least temporarily, when a person moves to a new location. Thus, when the physical distance to relatives and close ones increases due to the relocation, the social support available is less than before. A process of rebuilding the social network starts at the new location and the supportive social network grows stronger again.

The use of the internet can also be examined from a geographical point of view. In her research, Eva Thulin (2004) has examined young people's internet use from a geographical perspective. Thulin interviewed 43 young adults twice, with two years in between the interviews. In addition, the researcher asked the informants to keep a diary of their internet use the week before the interviews took place. When the first interview took place the young adults were in their third year of high school and about 19 years old. The results indicate that young people use the opportunities of online communication in various ways. They used e-mail, instant messaging, chats and discussion groups. These were used in different social contexts. The geographical distance also had an impact on what kind of communication was used. The results of the research show that young adult's use online communication to keep in touch primarily with people they know offline. Young people don't look to establish new friendships or relationships online, for instance with foreign people. However the

internet makes keeping in touch with friends and family members studying or working abroad easier. The internet can also be considered as a tool that facilitates the maintenance of social relationships, and the opportunity to socialize online makes relationships more sustainable as keeping in touch is easier in spite of the geographical distances involved (Thulin 2004, 49–50,151–152).

Oppressive social relations and empowering interactions in students' everyday life

Close supportive relationships can also be associated with negative, oppressive, or compelling features. Giving too much of oneself can lead to negative consequences for the person giving support (Thoits 1995). On the other hand, the person in need of support can feel that he or she can't expect support from relatives or other close ones due to the fact that the need for support is so great. This is something that was revealed in Kaisa Ketokivi's (2008) research on how emotionally wounded people who had experienced severe crises, had survived these difficult situations and how they used their social relations as a support structure for coping.

In her research, Ketokivi (2008, 266) found that many of the informants were paying particular attention to how they would communicate their situation to their mothers. The informants did not want to cause their mother any concern, but they also wanted to avoid care that was too intrusive. This way of protecting both oneself and the significant others, applied only to family members, but another feature significant to close family was that the person in crises was primarily dealt with as a family member, and the difficult situation was considered as a secondary issue. The support a person in crisis got from his or her family was mostly practical, for instance taking the form of financial support. The care and support from the family seems primarily intended to get the person in crisis back on his or her feet again. There seemed to be little support which aimed at sharing the crisis within the family.

The results of previous research (Granholm, 2006) show that a common feature among the clients of the Virtual Shoulder was a strong need to act as there was nothing wrong in their lives. In their messages, the students going through difficult situations in life tell of hiding their thoughts and feelings from their family, friends and acquaintances. The reason for keeping their thoughts and feelings to themselves is that they are ashamed of them. The clients were afraid that others would laugh at them or despise them. Some of the clients also expressed wanting to avoid causing their loved ones

any distress. Some also wrote about wanting to protect themselves from their parents concern, and this resembles the phenomenon of double protection identified by Ketokivi (2008) in her research.

Based on her research results, Ketokivi (2008; 2009) divided the close social relationships of emotionally wounded people into five categories. The first group consists of the closest relationships to people who are relied upon. The potential loss of these people would result in a total collapse. Specific features for this group of people are a sense of closeness and a sharing of fundamental experiences in life. The second group of relationships is that offering maintaining support. This group includes people that offer social, emotional and practical support when needed. This kind of support is offered by close relatives, parents and trusted friends. The third group of relations is to people who can face and completely accept the person in crises. These people – friends, peers with similar experiences and professional helpers – offer empowering support or empowering bonding. The fourth group includes people who distance themselves from the person in crisis. People in the fifth group sympathize with the person in crisis but they show their empathy from a distance.

The results that are presented later in this article show that the main share of students that contact the Virtual Shoulder write about having multiple and different types of social relationships. All of these relationships have their own specific function, yet in spite of having these multiple social relationships the clients feel a need to seek help and support from outside them.

Applying qualitative content analysis as a method of exploring virtual messages

The research presented in this article is both qualitative and inductive. The research method used is similar to the qualitative content analysis described by Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002, 110–115). In addition, I have also used the method of qualitative content specification (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 185–188). I started to read the research data without a specific theoretical frame, and my aim was not to verify any existing theory. However the inductive exploration of the research data resulted in focusing on the concepts of loneliness and social support, and these developed into the theoretical frame which was used for this research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 83).

The data consists of messages written by university students. These messages are viewed as narratives in which the students describe their experiences of going through challenging situations in life. Characteristic of these narratives is that they are written in great despair and in a very emotional state of mind. This makes the analysis and interpretation of the messages challenging. The emotions that the messages express have to be considered, but it is also important to view them from a distance or sometimes to even put them completely aside from the research.

The length of the messages used as research data varied from half a page up to four pages. The messages were anonymized and all information that could lead to identifying the writer was erased. The age, gender, subject of study, and campus location was identifiable and available only if the writer had mentioned them in their messages. The starting point of the messages is what the writer wants to share about her or his life. Some start by presenting themselves thoroughly, whilst others go directly to describing the problems they are experiencing, and the thoughts and feelings that are caused by these problems. Some of the messages are factual descriptions of difficult situations in life, and others are more reflective, mirroring the thoughts and feelings of the writer. Some of the messages could be considered as emotional outbursts, where the writer tells about difficult feelings that she or he has been unable to disclose to anybody before (Granholm 2006).

Content analysis makes the different phenomena that occur in the data visible. It also enables the description of the relationship which exists between these phenomena. Thus, it is essential to separate the similarities and differences that occur in the research material. Data is classified according to the meanings detected in the research material (Janhonen & Nikkonen 2001, 23–24). Inductive content analysis is a process with three steps. First the data is reduced, then it is categorized, and in the final step the data is abstracted. The aim of content analysis is to create a verbal and clear description of the studied phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 110–115).

I started acquainting myself with the data by reading all of the messages carefully, and simultaneously making notes about my thoughts and feelings in my research diary. While reading the data I noticed that loneliness and the feeling of being an outsider were very strong in many of the messages. I decided to actively focus on what the students wrote about their social relationships and their experience of loneliness. Was it a lack of people who they could talk to about their difficulties that made them write to the Virtual Shoulder? Besides the content analysis, I also noted the gender and in what year of studies the writers were, if the information was clearly discernable in the

messages. I also noted if the writer mentioned having been in contact with professional help in order to find a solution to the situation.

In the next phase of the study I collected all the notes I had made into a table, in which I also wrote a short abstract for each message. In the abstracts I focused on the research interests that had emerged during the reading process; loneliness and social relations (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 111). Next I started to divide the abstracts into groups according to similarities in the themes of the messages. At this stage of the analysis I was surprised by the fact that many students seemed to feel lonely, despite having existing social relationships.

Almost all of the students mentioned having some kind of social relationships offline. They mentioned parents, siblings, romantic partners, children, relatives, fellow students, co-workers, friends and acquaintances. Some wrote about having online friends. According to the messages, many of the writers had spoken about their thoughts and feelings to someone close. A rather large group of the students had been in contact with professional helpers such as medical doctors, psychologists or psychiatrists at the Student Health Services. Some had a previous history of being in professional care and some wrote about being in-line for getting help. Despite having existing social relations, the feelings of loneliness and being an outsider came across very strongly in a large part of the message data.

I wanted to focus my study on the loneliness the students expressed. I started going through the data one more time, comparing the different ways students had written about feeling lonely and outside. In this phase of the analysis, I focused on finding entries in the messages where the students had written about loneliness and their social relationships. I noted the passages where students reflected on the reasons behind their feelings of loneliness and "outsideness", and this analysis was partly conducted from an intuitive perspective.

I started conceptualizing the data by writing down short memos in my research diary (e.g. Strauss & Corbin 2008, 117–141). While trying to make the analysis more abstract, I also aimed at connecting the determinant reasons behind the expressions of loneliness that had occurred in the data. My aim was to open up and consider the central concepts in the data by noting my thoughts and feelings, together with any reflections. Besides the writing, I continued to categorize the messages, trying out alternative categories. Next I read my collated notes, connecting and separating

messages according to the determinants which arose. I compared how different determinants occurred within different categories, and also looked at the differences between categories. This categorizing was a challenging process as some of the messages seemed to have elements that could fit in more than one of the categories. Gradually, the categories started to form meaningful entities and I went on to assemble the results, recording them and making final conclusions.

The dimension of loneliness in messages written to the Virtual Shoulder

The messages written by the university students to the Virtual Shoulder gave me an exclusive opportunity to observe very intimate narratives about loneliness and social relationships. The analysis of the data expressed how human relationships and the course of life were reflected as experiences of loneliness, in the student narratives. Next I describe how the students wrote about their current life situations and their need for support, and I connect this to what the students wrote about their social relationships or the lack thereof. According to my analysis, the students described three dimensions of loneliness: students telling about loneliness, students telling about feeling excluded and not fitting in, and students referring to loneliness indirectly.

I) *Students telling about loneliness.* In the messages placed in this category, the students describe their situation using words such as alone, lonely and loneliness, and some of the students state directly that they suffer from loneliness. Twelve messages were placed in this category, six written by women and three by men. The writer's gender was not detectable in three of the messages. Four of the messages came from first or second year students, and four of the messages were written by students who were in their third year of studies or who had studied even longer. In four cases the students did not mention in what phase of their studies they were. Five students wrote about having contacted the Student Health Services or other professional help. Seven of the students did not mention any contact with professional helpers, and a few of these students wrote about wanting to avoid seeking outside help. They wrote that they were not capable of doing it, and that they neither dared nor wanted to talk about their problems with anybody else.

Many of the students who told about their loneliness expressed that they felt ashamed of themselves and their situation. Loneliness in itself seemed to be a shameful and painful issue for these students. However, their messages reflected a desire to open up about these thoughts and feelings, and at the time, a faceless and voiceless disclosure online was the only thing they were capable of doing.

Having very few social relationships outside their closest family was common among these students. Family members appeared to be the best, and in some cases, the only friends of these lonely students. There were a few students in this group who talked about having friends online, and to some extent to whom they were able to talk to about their problems. In their messages, the students expressed a desire of wanting to get out of their loneliness. The messages also conveyed some uncertainty about how to act in social situations.

The messages written by the students who tell of loneliness were very emotional, and they wrote that they were conscious about the effect the continuous sense of loneliness was having on them and their well-being. The messages conveyed a feeling of powerlessness in a comprehensive situation, which in many cases had been going on for a long time. The students expressed a need to talk to someone about their difficult situation in life, and the loneliness these students talk about seems to be both emotional and social, and it has other features characteristic of loneliness (Laine 2005, 170).

II) *Students telling about feeling excluded and not fitting in.* In these messages, the students do not use words such as lonely or loneliness when reflecting on their feelings, but they imply having feelings of this type. These students expressed that they felt excluded and as not fitting in. Fourteen messages were placed in this category, eleven written by women and one by a man. The writer's gender was not detectable in two of the cases. Three of the writers were first or second year students, and in four of the messages the students indicated that they had studied for more than a few years or were about to finish their studies. In seven cases, the phase of the student's studies remained unclear. Four of the students wrote either about seeing a professional, or that they had seen one previously. Professional help was not mentioned in nine of the messages.

Discontentment with the quantity and quality of friends was characteristic for messages placed in this category. The students' social networks consisted of some superficial friendships and a few closer friends, but this didn't satisfy the student's social needs. The students wrote about needing "real" or "true" friends. In some of the messages the students wrote about having weak social skills, and the problems these students mentioned included having difficulties in getting acquainted with new people and with keeping up lasting friendships. Characteristic for the students in this group was a sense of social insecurity, and in some cases the impression was that the students had too high hopes for their social relationships.

The hopes and needs of students who told of feeling excluded and not fitting in were similar to those expressed by the students who conveyed feelings of loneliness. These students expressed wanting a place where they could open up about their thoughts and feelings. Another common feature among the two categories was feeling ashamed and afraid to talk about the problems they were experiencing. These students were afraid that disclosing such issues to someone close would negatively affect the existing social relationship.

III) *Students referring to loneliness indirectly.* In the messages placed in this category the writers don't mention feeling lonely or outside, but many of the messages contain expressions that can be interpreted as referring to experiences of loneliness. The students write about not having anybody else to turn to, which can be a sign of helplessness in a situation that the writer is not able to solve by themselves. Seventeen messages were placed in this category. Seven of the messages were written by women and two by men, and in eight cases the gender was not detectable. The writers of the messages in this group were clearly more advanced students. Two of the students were attending the university for the first or second year, six were in the final stage of their studies and two were post graduate students. In seven cases the study phase remained unclear. Eight of the students in this group wrote about either currently or formerly being in contact with professional helpers. Two of the students wrote that they had plans to seek professional help, and in seven cases professional help was not mentioned.

The primary concern in four of the messages placed in this category was the well-being of a close relative, spouse or friend. In these cases the social relationships themselves can be considered as a reason for contacting the Virtual Shoulder. The situations of these writers were diverse; one was concerned about an elderly parent, and others about the mental well-being of siblings or a spouse. These messages conveyed a concern for others but they also reflected a concern for the writer's own well-being in a situation where they felt helpless. In these situations the writers experiences a "double concern" as they wished for help and support for themselves, and also in solving difficulties that their close ones were experiencing.

Characteristic of the messages in this category was that the writers recounted a difficult situation that had lasted for a longer period of time. They had tried to solve the situation by both discussing it with professionals and also with the people involved. Many of the writers wished for an expert or outside point of view. As such, these writers might primarily be looking for a form of empowering bonding.

Changes in the course of life and relationships seem to be one of the reasons causing the loneliness which is apparent in all three categories. Social relationships or a lack of them is obviously associated with loneliness, and many of the writers expressed the feeling that they had too few people that they felt close to. Among the writers were students who primarily experienced emotional loneliness, and who expressed that they wished for a romantic relationship. There were also students who wrote about social loneliness, expressing a need for more friends.

Social relationships also seemed to be a burden for some of the writers, who wrote about overprotective parents and close ones. Social relationships could also be perceived as being burdensome in cases where the writer worried for the well-being of others. Relationships also caused performance requirements that were experienced as stressful. In these messages the students indicated that they did not want to disappoint their encouraging parents and friends, and as such they had tried to cover up issues such as their poor academic performance, fatigue, depression or anxiety for as long as possible. The writers did not want to disclose not feeling well, due to a fear of how their close ones would react. This fear, the shame that they felt about their situation, together with the continuous pretense that everything was all right had led to their social withdrawal and isolation, ending in loneliness. The students experiencing

loneliness who were connected to social relationships expressed the position that they had contacted the Virtual Shoulder in the hope of getting some external help and support. In my opinion, it is these students who will benefit the most from the empowering bonding that the virtual service can offer.

In many of the messages, changes in everyday life or changes in the course of life seem to be the reason behind the loneliness described. For some writers, these changes came on unexpectedly, like a crisis. An unexpected illness, injury or the ending of a relationship were examples of such changes. One of the students wrote about feeling that they had become distanced from their fellow students since falling ill and having spent a long period of time in hospital, which had then led to loneliness. Also, the ending of a romantic relationship was described in many cases as a crisis-like change, which made the writer feel decidedly lonely.

In other cases the changes in life were less unexpected, and stemmed from incidents that are a routine part of life such as moving out of the family house, leaving the childhood home town, beginning university studies in a new location, and starting an independent life. In these cases the writers expressed having difficulties in adjusting to their new situation, be it the new location, life as a student, or the study process. Those students who felt lonely in their new study environment also wrote about having difficulties finding new friends, and they felt that they had not found people that were either congenial or trustworthy enough.

Graduating from university and starting regular work, or leaving the study location also seemed to be critical points in the students' life course. An uncertainty about the future was detectable in the messages submitted from students who were about to graduate. These students had to deal with leaving the study environment and also to start searching for a job. In situations like these, keeping in touch with friends is not first priority, but making new friends in new work and free time environments can be challenging and might therefore lead to loneliness.

A few of the writers reflected on how finding a long-term romantic partner and moving in together had made them rethink their social relationships and loneliness on a more general level. In these cases the writers were content with the partnership, but wished that they had more friends. Students who experienced loneliness connected to changes in their life expressed that they had contacted the Virtual Shoulder hoping to find social support. These students also had a need for advice and help from a person

with expertise in problems related to the life of university students, and also in the life of young adults in general.

A private, low threshold helping environment – log off

The results of the study indicate that a lack of social relationships is not the primary reason why university students contact virtual services when experiencing difficulties in life. Thus, we have to look elsewhere for the motives, at least in the case of those writing to the Virtual Shoulder. My interpretation of the messages is that students feel that the threshold for disclosing matters that are experienced as difficult online seems to be suitably low. As seen in the data, even young people who have not talked to anybody about their difficulties before, dare to open up to the Virtual Shoulder.

The internet offers students who do not want, dare or feel that they can talk about their thoughts and feelings face-to-face, an opportunity for disclosing their problems anonymously. This might encourage them to seek professional help offline. The internet is an arena where socially marginalized students can practice telling about their intimate thoughts and feelings, and they also get to practice receiving another person's reaction to their disclosure (Turkle 1997, 26).

Some students felt that they did not want to bother their close ones by talking to them, as they felt that these people had been listening to and supporting them for much too long already. Others didn't want to talk about their situations directly because they didn't want their close ones to become worried. My interpretation of the actions of these students is that they use the Virtual Shoulder to seek new, external perspectives on their situations, and as a neutral space where they can openly talk about their situation. These results are also similar to the findings of previous research (Ketokivi 2008; 2009).

A result of the research that I find particularly interesting is that some people who experience difficult situations in life seem to have a need to disclose and talk openly about their feelings to someone who is not personally involved in the crisis. Thus, a person in a difficult situation needs support from someone who can respond to the situation more neutrally than someone who is close to them. This support is termed as empowering bonding (Ketokivi 2008, 271), and it can be received for example from a peer or a professional helper. My interpretation is that many of the students contacting

the Virtual Shoulder were looking for empowering bonding. I also believe that virtual supportive services can offer empowering bonding to people who are experiencing difficult situations in life. It might also be a fact that the Virtual Shoulder (like other non-governmental services offering online support) and where volunteers and professionals join forces are particularly suitable for mediating empowering bonding. However, a person contacting the service wishing for an alternative point of view might not care if the person answering their message is a volunteer or a professional helper.

There also seemed to be some writers who contacted the Virtual Shoulder in hope of getting an expert's opinion regarding their situation. These writers wanted the expert opinions of Nyyti as to whether or not they should get professional help (in real life), and where they should turn to. In some messages the writers expressed being dissatisfied with the professional help they had received elsewhere and asked for an outside opinion regarding the adequacy of the treatment. During its twenty-five years of operation, Nyyti has developed into an organization which alongside Student Healthcare Services can be considered as expert on the varied situations encountered in university students' lives. Since 2005, Nyyti has offered online services to all Finnish university students, nationwide (Ilolakso 2005).

Another category of students observed in the data were those stating that they "don't know how to be with people". In their research, Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2003) argue that people who feel lonely might turn to the internet more easily than people who are more social by nature. Those who feel lonely and socially unskilled might learn how to socialize when communicating facelessly in text, but this still might not be enough to encourage them to make contact with people off-line. This therefore presents a big challenge for organizations offering online services; to design and develop services that encourage people in social engagement that is applicable in an off-line context.

Lonely students who feel that there is no one they can talk to about their difficulties use the Virtual Shoulder to unload and share their thoughts and feelings. Students who have a circle of close ones to whom they can disclose their experiences tend to ask the Virtual Shoulder service for an outside point of view or an expert opinion. Students who, for some reason, don't want to talk to their close ones, contact the Virtual Shoulder looking for empowering bonding. However, those students who lack social skills or who are too afraid or ashamed to talk about their thoughts and

feelings are offered a virtual arena where they can practice talking about their difficult situation. The Virtual Shoulder can hopefully lower the threshold for these students and support them to start developing social relationships and open up about their difficult situations in real life. The benefits of virtual services, including their low threshold, easy access and openness also have their down side and risks. The service users might disclose too much without reflecting on the risks that registering to an online service may include, or any potential commercial parties (with interests of their own) that might be involved in the service.

The internet is an essential part of contemporary everyday life for young people. Therefore it is important to reflect upon how the internet and virtual arena could be used in public welfare services. Related new technology is flexible and there are a number of ways in which it may be applied. Alongside more permanent and individual services, the internet can rapidly offer targeted services, for example in a crisis situation. Virtual helping environments offer a lot of opportunities, but there is still a further need for discussion, research and development to ensure the quality of these services so that they can truly function as a channel for empowering bonding.

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II   Young people and mental health: when ICT becomes a tool of participation in public health in Finland

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Introduction

Owing to increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT), concepts such as health, wellness and participation in life have gained a new and wider meaning. The Internet and mobile devices provide access to virtual opportunities for information seeking, real-time interaction, relationship building and collaborative involvement. This chapter supports research (Zimmerman, 1995; Christensen et al, 2011) suggesting that (community) participation has a positive effect on psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment is defined as a mechanism that gives individuals greater mastery and control of their lives (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995).

Participation is defined as taking personal action in issues that concern one's own wellbeing; it also include a social dimension of a striving towards the common good (Anttiroiko, 2003). The concept of participation in this text is very closely related to the concept of social support. Social support has been defined as an exchange of knowledge, emotional or evaluative support. Social support is mediated in social networks and relationships through human interaction (Heaney and Israel, 1997). The online participation described in this chapter includes the mentioned features of social support. The participation is in fact sharing information and knowledge, sharing experiences and offering emotional support.

The aim of this chapter is to give an insight in how participation through ICT and particularly the Internet can and is used for maintaining and promoting mental wellbeing by young people in Finland by providing an overview of recent research and literature describing the current situation in Finland. The focus is on university students; they are a group of young people that have been socialised into using this new technology since the early days of the Internet. Another reason for concentrating

on this specific group of young adults is because of the interesting literature and research available.

These Finnish university students have their own national healthcare system: the Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS). This service provides general, mental and oral healthcare for undergraduate students of universities and other institutions of higher education. To ensure quality of service the employees at FSHS continuously carry out research. Research is conducted on topics directly connected to medicine and healthcare and also on related topics such as the students' mental wellbeing and students' electronic communication with healthcare professionals (http://www.yths.fi/en).

The chapter consists of five sections. The first section gives a short general overview of ICT use among these young adults and is based on recent statistics. In the following two sections questions on mental health among young adults in Finland are examined. These give a brief overview on recent research concerning university students' mental health issues and e-health in Finland. In the fourth section the Nyyti Student Support Centre (www.nyyti.fi) and its virtual services will be used to example how the Internet can serve both as a channel for support seeking and as a mechanism for participating in giving support to peers in need. The chapter concludes with a summarising discussion and suggestions on how ICT could, in the future, be utilised to an even greater extent.

Finnish youth and young adults on the Internet

For young people and young adults the Internet has become a natural part of everyday life. Young people in Finland spend a lot of time hanging out in virtual spaces. Information and communication technologies are primarily used to keep in touch with friends but also for sharing thoughts, ideas and supporting peers in anonymous arenas, or for finding information on available services such as healthcare. Studies show that Finns and especially young people in Finland are frequent users of the Internet. The most recent statistics describing the situation (spring 2010) show that 76% of all Finns aged 16–24 use the Internet several times a day. Among the age group 25–34 the percentage is two points higher (Tieto- ja viestintätekniikan käyttö –tutkimus, 2010, Statistics Finland).

The most popular categories of Internet use for young Finns aged between 16 and 34 are e-mail and reading online newspapers, or following the web pages of TV

channels. Additionally, the Internet is frequently used for searching for information about products and services, and for banking. Over 80% of young people aged 16–24 and 76% of the young adults aged 25–34 are registered users of some social media site (such as Twitter or Facebook). Among the younger age group 67% are daily users of social media; the figure drops slightly among the elder age group to 60% (Tieto- ja viestintätekniikan käyttö –tutkimus, 2010, Statistics Finland).

Young people also use the Internet in searching for health, illness and diet information. Almost two thirds of young people aged 16 to 24, and nearly three quarters of the Finnish population aged 25 to 34, use the Internet for this purpose. Eighty-six per cent of all Finns aged 16 to 34 employ the Internet to search for information and for learning and increasing knowledge (Tieto- ja viestintätekniikan käyttö –tutkimus, 2010, Statistics Finland).

Mental wellbeing among university students in Finland

Since 2000 the Finnish Students Health Services have conducted three nationwide comparable survey studies (Kunttu and Huttunen, 2001, 2005, 2009) on Finnish university students' health. The latest survey was conducted in 2008 among students at Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. The questionnaire was mailed to almost 10,000 students, aged under 35. The response rate was 51.1%. The report's results have been compared with the results of the previous two studies.

Among the respondents 42% were single and living in their own household. Cohabitation was the second most common way of living, as roughly one third of the students reported living together with their spouse but without children. Less than 10% were living in a commune or a shared household. A total of 74% of the respondents spent time with friends during their leisure time on a weekly basis. Slightly more than half of the students participated in different student association activities. Even so, only 55% of the students felt that they belonged to a study-related group. Various measures indicated that 5–6% of the students considered themselves to be lonely. Nearly one in three of the male students reported experiencing having too few or no people, to talk to.

The results of the study indicate that 27% of respondents had problems with their mental health. The most common problems included continuously experienced overstrain, feeling unhappy and depressed, having difficulties in concentrating on the tasks at hand, and inability to sleep because of worries. Mental health issues seemed to be more common among female students. These problems occurred among 32% of the women and 19% of the men.

The results of the mental health screening showed that 27% of all students experienced considerable stress. The stress was most frequently related to public performance and difficulties in getting a grip on studies. Almost 20% of the students had a negative perception concerning their mood. They also felt pessimistic when thinking of the future, and of their own resources and capabilities. Empowering factors included social relations and sexuality. The experienced mental problems and stress were similar among students in both types of universities. The results of the survey done in 2008 indicates that, among those studying at the university, the mental health problems were broadly as common as they were in 2004.

University students and e-health

The Internet has opened up new ways for the authorities to implement health promotion and share health-related information. For citizens and service users the Internet has led to new opportunities for independent action in healthcare issues. Among other things people can now renew prescriptions and choose an appropriate time for making appointments with doctors. The Internet has also opened up new ways of communicating with healthcare professionals, as Internet communication with healthcare professionals gives patients more freedom to choose when, what and how they interact with service providers (McGeady et al, 2008).

The endless amount of information that is available online has also changed the relationship between patient and doctor. The patient has become a consumer and the doctor a service provider. In this new relationship the patient and doctor can meet on a more equal level giving the patient more power and more possibilities for action. The patient has (presumably) already looked up his or her symptoms on the Internet and hence, will have an idea of what might be wrong. The negative effect of this development is that the expectations of both healthcare practitioners and patients increase. Patients expect to get care that is more than the diagnosis available on the

Internet. In turn the healthcare professionals expect their patients to be able to find out information by themselves and not to make unnecessary appointments (McGeady et al, 2008).

The opportunity to independently seek information and to communicate with physicians electronically appears to suit university students very well. Students often live an irregular life, combining studies with part-time work and hobbies. This means that it can be difficult for them to communicate or make appointments with doctors and other healthcare professionals during ordinary office hours. The Internet has therefore become an important means of communication between the students and healthcare professionals. The results of a recently published dissertation (Castrén, 2008) show that both physicians and patients at the FSHS have a positive attitude towards using email for communication.

Sharing and caring

The following section reviews the Nyyti Student Support Centre (www.nyyti.fi) and its services. The aim here is, using Nyyti as an example, to demonstrate how young people in Finland use the Internet both as a channel for seeking support and help for themselves, and as a mechanism for participating in providing support to peers in need. Many studies (Kraut et al, 1996; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000; Thulin, 2004; Subrahmanyam et al, 2008) show that, when online, people predominantly communicate and interact with people they already know in real life. The example below indicates that communicating with strangers can empower people who share difficult life situations. It serves also as an example of how contacts on the Internet can lead to the formation of face to face acquaintances and interaction.

Nyyti is a registered association established in 1984. Nyyti develops and produces services that promote mental wellbeing among students at Finnish universities and art academies. It is a non-governmental organisation that employs about ten people with degrees in psychology, social psychology, theology and nursing. There are also about 40 voluntary workers engaged in the organisation as assistants in the face to face groups and engaged in marketing the services at different student events.

The support centre offers face to face and web-based group counselling. Both face to face and online groups are supervised by professional therapists and/or employees at Nyyti. The topics dealt with in both types of groups are partly selected from the results

of the student health surveys done by FSHS. The face to face groups are available in the Helsinki area only. These groups gather people with common concerns and problems. The face to face groups deal with topics such as social anxiety, performance related anxiety, breaking up, and coping lifeskills. The virtual services provided by Nyyti also include a wide range of online material; articles on different topics regarding situations and problems that occur in the lives of young adults, exercises and tests and links to useful information and other services.

Online groups have been available on the Nyyti website since autumn 2005. At first there were two online counselling groups available; one aimed at Finnish exchange students leaving to study abroad, being abroad or returning home from a period of exchange studies and a second one aimed at students having problems with living to busy lives called 'From stress to balance'. The feedback from the online groups was positive and therefore Nyyti continued developing the service (Nyyti ry, 2010).

At the moment (in autumn 2011) there are three online groups dealing with different topics. One group is for people who have just ended a relationship; seeking support and sharing their experiences. The second group is for single people wanting to share their experiences concerning problems with establishing relationships. Finally, there is a group for people suffering from a more general feeling of loneliness; seeking support and sharing their feelings on this difficult topic (http://www.nyyti.fi/palvelut/nettiryhmat/).

The online groups are open for discussions during the academic year only, from the middle of September to the middle of December and from the middle of January to the end of May. During the summer of 2011 an experiment was conducted through keeping the group for people suffering from loneliness open during summertime, in-between the semesters. These discussion groups can be found on the Nyyti webpage with the messages being openly accessible: they can be read by anyone. Those who wish to join in the discussion need to register as users on Nyyti's webpage. Registration is free and open to all interested parties (http://www.nyyti.fi/palvelut/nettiryhmat/).

Every online group has its own supervisor who also acts as the discussion moderator, reading through the messages before they are posted on the discussion. The online counselling groups are supervised by Nyyti employees and every group has its own supervisor throughout the semester. The supervisors intervene in the counselling group a couple of times per week. They welcome new members and summarise

the discussions, sometimes picking up on a theme or topic that has got lost in the discussion. Moreover, they suggest useful exercises sometimes, or reading connected to the themes that are under discussion. The supervision and moderation makes the atmosphere in the discussion groups safer as it eradicates inappropriate and offensive comments from participants. If a participant posts a message indicating that he or she is experiencing an acute crisis the supervisor can answer the message privately without posting it to the ongoing discussion.

Although these online discussion groups are moderated and supervised they still give the participants the freedom required for independent decision making and action. The purpose of the discussion groups is to provide space for these young adults, in similar life situations, to share their experiences and support each other. A concrete example of the potential outcomes of an online group actively acting to collectively make things better is the 'Friday hangouts'. These hangouts became real due to the initiative taken by the discussion group for people suffering from loneliness. Some of the participants in this online discussion group started talking about the possibility of meeting face to face to continue getting to know each other. Nyyti provided the facilities for the first ever hangout evening held in Helsinki in 2006. Now, five years after the first hangout evening was held, these evenings have become a regular event and are arranged all over the country, facilitated by the student unions in the different university cities. The Friday hangouts are free of charge and offer an alcohol-free alternative for university students to socialise and meet new people.

In November and December 2010 Nyyti did a user survey on the virtual services provided. The survey was open on the www.nyyti.fi web site and there were 502 responses. The results of the survey showed that the main purpose of people visiting the website is to garner information regarding their actual life situation. People also looked up the pages to read articles on different topics and to follow the discussion groups (http://www.nyyti.fi/uutiset/nyyti.fi-kavijatutkimus/).

These results correlate with the results from the national statistics referred to earlier in this chapter, which show that the young people commonly use the Internet in search for health, illness and diet information.

The users who participated in the survey felt that the online groups were important channels through which they could anonymously share their experiences. The counselling groups are an important source of support from people in similar situations

and with similar experiences. The answers given also indicated that the people participating in the discussion groups felt that it was a great relief and helpful to get the chance to write about and share their experiences. The people read and wrote to the online counselling groups in order to get help, and to gain new perspectives and advice on their current situation. The results from the survey showed that the users regard the discussion groups as both interesting and helpful (http://www.nyyti.fi/uutiset/nyyti.fi-kavijatutkimus/).

The preliminary analysis of messages posted to the online counselling group on the topic of loneliness supports the results of the survey[i]. The conclusions drawn from the 58 reviewed messages strongly indicate that the opportunity for participation and sharing that is given in the counselling group is an empowering experience. As the quotations below show, the participants support each other by sharing similar experiences:

> "I have always been actively participating in different activities at the university and I talk to several people every day. These people at the university are more like acquaintances and not my friends. I don't even feel comfortable with these people and I don't enjoy the same kind of living they do. Constant partying and gossiping about other people are not the most important things in my life!" M2[ii]

> "That's exactly how I think and feel. When I came to the university I was excited and had high expectations on the new environment and interesting, people with common interests. I was shocked to find out that the social interaction was on the same level as it was in high school. I don't have the energy to awe about peoples clothing and who-did-what-with-who at the latest party." M3

Giving out advice on coping strategies and telling each other about the sort of actions they have taken to improve their situations is a further method of sharing and supporting. Many participants wrote that they had been following the discussions in the counselling group for a long time before deciding to write a message themselves. For these silent readers finding out that there are other students with similar experiences was a great relief in itself.

"I have problems with my self-esteem. Even writing here feels a bit scary. I have been following this group for some time and even read the archives with discussions from previous years and now I wanted to contribute by writing." M14

"I am happy that this group is in action again. It is a relief to read about other people's thoughts and experiences. Many of them are very familiar and it is easy to identify with them." M21

The participants also report on the feelings of community and fellowship they have found in the online group. People writing to the counselling group expressed a desire to establish contact with each other outside the group and even to meet face to face. The opportunity to get acquainted online before meeting face to face is greatly appreciated by the socially insecure or shy people that participate in the online counselling group.

"By the way is it possible to get in touch with other people writing here? Can I post my e-mail address to the group or is there a better way to do it?" M4

"It is possible to exchange contact information among participants. As I recall from earlier years there has at least been one private board game-evening arranged among participants in this group. Publishing ones e-mail address has been found out to be the easiest way to get in touch with each other. We recommend that the address you share is an informal one." S[iii]

The primary function of the counselling group is not to match people, but to offer a place to write about and share their burden of loneliness. As the group is supervised and moderated in advance there is no danger that the discussion can become indecent or off-topic.

Several studies (Reeves, 2000; Eysenbach et al, 2004; Josefsson, 2005) show that online communities for people facing similar difficulties and situations are an important source of social support. These online discussion groups give people the opportunity to share experiences concerning both the practical or technical details

on symptoms and treatments, and to also exchange thoughts and feelings such as uncertainty, fear and anxiety. Furthermore, helping a fellow patient can be both an empowering experience, and the opening up and writing has, in itself, therapeutic features (Wright and Bell, 2003). Another advantage of these online groups is that the participants themselves choose how they want to use the support offered. They may just be the silent readers of other people's experiences but can, if they feel like it, contribute with their own experience and expertise (Josefsson, 2005).

Potential problems also exist, and participants in online discussion groups need to be aware of these. Concerns about privacy and the inappropriate use of messages posted to online discussion groups, and the risk of unreliable information have to be taken into consideration. The difficulty inherent in finding the most appropriate information among often tremendous amounts of text can entail difficulty in locating support online (Heaton, 2011). An added issue that needs to be taken account of is that not all people are able to make use of online support. For example people suffering from severe mental health problems are primarily in need of face to face support and care. These people might benefit from using online services but only as a complement to other forms of care (Granholm, 2006, 2010).

Discussion

This article has presented some changes in the way people seek help, participate, interact, build relationships and collaborate in health-related issues through the use of ICT. The boundaries of time and place no longer place limits on people's access to health-related information, help and care. The Internet offers an abundance of health information; it is easy to get information on any medical condition both from professionals and people with their own personal experiences. The information available online makes it easier for people to perform their own preliminary diagnosis on their condition and draw inference on whether or not they need to consult a physician. This can, at best, reduce unnecessary doctor visits but, at worst, it may put people's health at risk as a diagnosis based on information from the Internet can easily be incorrect.

The Internet also offers the possibility for people to consult physicians online. This opportunity has made it easier for people with busy schedules or people unable to travel owing to disabilities or other conditions to get in touch with health

professionals. The Internet further provides people living in the countryside or otherwise far from a doctors' surgery the opportunity to stay in contact without having to make a lengthy journey for minor healthcare issues.

The Internet also offers an arena for anonymous interaction between people who might never be able to come together face to face. Online discussion groups offer people the chance to share experiences they might be too ashamed to talk about in real life. In online groups peers and professionals can offer the participants support and advice. Online discussions that are openly available on the Internet can be of help to more people than the active participants as there are often a large number of people silently following the discussion. This is a quality that is characteristic to online group interaction and a feature that cannot be realised in face to face groups.

The theoretical approach used as a starting point of this chapter indicated that participation can lead to psychological empowerment and increased wellbeing. For students, online communities provide excellent arenas for participating in order to improve their own wellbeing, and to support each other. As the examples presented above show, turning to the Internet to seek information, professional help and peer support occurs naturally for university students. But young adults are also eager to share their experiences on virtual arenas and to support others in need. The Internet is rapidly becoming a part of everyday life for every Finnish citizen, and a growing number of people around the world. The children and young people growing up today are socialised into communication and interacting on the Internet. Participation in an online community is for these digital natives (Prensky, 2001) as natural as participating in a real life community.

Modern information and communication technologies possess enormous as of yet untapped potential for exploration and development. The Internet will probably provide many more opportunities for including people in taking action on matters concerning their own wellbeing and health. New and innovative means for people to support and help each other virtually will, presumably, be discovered.

Yet even though the Internet is a dimension with unlimited opportunities there still are a number of people who for one reason or another cannot be part of the virtual society, and take advantage of the services provided. Reasons for not being able to participate in the virtual world can, for example, be a lack of equipment and/or computer skills, a lack of interest in things happening 'out there', or inability

to participate because of ill health or other reasons. Therefore it is important that alongside the virtual services we also keep developing face to face and trans-boundary services that enable people to act freely in choosing the arena that best suits their own situations.

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Internet resources

www.nyyti.fi
http://www.nyyti.fi/palvelut/nettiryhmat/
http://www.yths.fi/en

Notes

[i] The analysis presented here is done on messages posted to the counselling group discussing loneliness during the first two weeks of October 2010. A more thorough analysis on all messages posted to the counselling group during the autumn semester 2010 is under process. The results are presented in a separate article as a part of a doctoral dissertation estimated to be ready the end of 2013.

[ii] The quotations have been translated literally from Finnish by the author. The messages (M) are given numbers according to the order in which they occur.

[iii] 'S' denotes a supervisor.

III   Blended Lives: ICT talk among vulnerable young people in Finland

Camilla Granholm

Abstract

This article presents a qualitative study of ICT use among Finnish young people attending training programs for youth outside employment and education. The data comes from six focus group interviews and three individual interviews, as well as a single focus group interview with involved supervisors. The data was analyzed using McQuail's (1983) theory regarding the motives for individual media use. The results show that the young people use ICT primarily for entertainment, but their use is diverse. Young people choose the tools and dimensions for interaction that best fulfills their needs, blending together ingredients from both online and offline sources. Unlike previous research, young people in this study stated that they prefer talking to someone face-to-face about severe (health-related or emotional) problems. If social and youth services want to meet young people on their own terms both online and offline services are needed.

Key words:
ICT use, young people, outside employment and education, entertainment, social media

Introduction

Smartphones and tablet computers have made the internet available everywhere. We spend more time online and mix together ingredients from both the online and offline. We move between these two dimensions and are often simultaneously present in both (Stald 2008). We are in fact, living blended lives (e.g. life-mix in Turkle 2011, 157-162).

Mobile communication and internet use are especially important for young people. In Finland, 89% of young people aged 16-24 use the internet several times a day, and among young adults aged 25-34 this rises to 90% (Official Statistics of Finland 2014). Smartphones are common among young Finns and 80% of youth aged 16-24 and 81% of young adults aged 25-34 use a smartphone (Official Statistics of Finland 2013). Mobile communication is connected with belonging to certain social communities, to the construction of social identity, and to self-representation in relation to others (Oksama and Turtiainen 2004).

Some researchers stress the positive effects of this ICT-development, claiming that the generation born and raised with computers, mobile phones and the internet has developed an inherent confidence in using and applying new technologies and devices (Prensky 2001; Tapscott 1998). Others underline the potential dangers and threats to young peoples' safety and wellbeing that new technologies may present (Livingstone et al. 2011; Carr 2011). In an Australian literature review, Collin et al. (2011) claim that both research and media have in recent years over-emphasized the challenges and risks ICT can pose for young people. The review concludes that by focusing more on the benefits ICT may offer youth, some of the challenges may be overcome.

This article presents a qualitative study of ICT use among a group of young people outside employment and education, participating in two training programs in the Helsinki area of Finland. The study was conducted in co-operation with the professional supervisors for the training programs. During initial discussions about the research and later in group interviews, supervisors expressed a severe concern regarding the use of ICT among their young clients. The supervisors perceived this ICT use as excessive and entertainment-oriented. The main aim of this study is therefore to give voice to the young, and examine how they use ICT and what kind of needs does their ICT use fulfill? The results of the study are summarized as implications for practice in youth and social work, and also for research among marginalized young people.

ICT use among vulnerable and marginalized young people

In the Nordic countries, education is considered as one of the key components in building an equal and inclusive society (Arnesen & Lundahl 2006). Education plays a crucial role in adolescents' lives and their orientation to the future (Lindfors et al.

2012). Young people who are outside employment and education can be considered as falling into a "participation gap", as they are not involved in the activities in which their peers in general are (Cranmer 2010), and this implies a risk of exclusion.

In contemporary societies, the internet is significant for social inclusion (e.g. Steyaert and Gould 2009; Van Deursen et al. 2015). According to recent research, education seems to be one of the most determining factors affecting internet and ICT literacy (van Deursen et al, 2011; 2015). This means that (young) people without education are at risk of further exclusion if they lack the skills to fully participate in virtual discussions and make use of virtual services compared to their educated peers. Besides education, different institutional and society-level structures which frame young peoples' lives affect the way youth explores the internet. Recent research (Liu 2011) on the ICT use among Chinese youth shows that young people in China use the internet almost exclusively for entertainment, either as a toy or as a virtual world to provide an escape from life off-line. Using media in an escapist way is common among youth all over the world. Young people use media for viewing images of people's lives both similar to and different from their own. This can be interpreted as escapism, but can also be understood as a means of identity formation (Cranmer 2010; Lim et al. 2013; Oksama and Turtiainen 2004; Sihvonen 2015).

Media use among young people is heterogeneous and there are youth who choose to live without media (Barbosa Neves et al. 2015; Westlund and Bjur 2014). Research on ICT use by vulnerable and marginalized groups of young people shows that ICT use by these youths is, as with youths in general, diverse (Campos and Simões 2014; Cranmer 2010). In her study of thirteen 12-15 year olds who had been temporarily or permanently excluded from school, Cranmer (2010) found that these young people used ICT - like their peers attending school - for entertainment and keeping in touch with friends and people close to them,. Some participants in the study also sought online support in difficult situations such as illness, personal loss or family breakdown. In a study on juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk aged 13-18, Lim et al. (2013) found that Facebook was an important tool for socializing with peers among youth placed under curfew. The respondents in the research emphasized the importance of peer support and affirmation. Some youth engaged in promoting and seeking endorsement for their illegal activities, whilst others actively avoided engaging with their formal criminal friends online.

Recent research among young people in the US who suffer from mental health problems shows that seeking information online, for example on medication and diagnosis is common. Such information was used to be better prepared for mental health visits. According to the research, young people with mental health problems use the internet to commune with others suffering from the same kinds of difficulties (Gowen 2013.) However, in a study on ICT use among Norwegian disabled youth, Söderström (2009) found that unlike the youth with mental health problems, the participants in her study did not seek social support from online groups or disability-related networks and stressed features other than disability in their online interactions with peers. ICT was utilized to ease feelings of loneliness, to escape their identification as disabled, and to interact and display an identity as an ordinary youth. So, young people in vulnerable positions due to mental or physical problems can be seen to use ICT for finding information that helps explain their current situation, and also to seek acceptance and community with peers or youth in general.

Social categories such as ethnicity, gender and class may also cause a risk of being marginalized. These categories not only influence access to technology, but also affect how it is used. Wildermuth and Dalsgaard (2006) explored media use among youth in Recife, Brazil. They found that due to a lower education level and cultural socialization, lower-class youth are less critical and not able to exploit media in the same manner as their more-privileged peers. For disadvantaged youth, media was merely a window through which they could peek into the lives of ordinary young people and a way of escaping everyday problems. In a study by Campos and Simões (2014), for Portuguese Afro-descendant youth engaged in rap music, ICT was seen as much more than a tool for escaping everyday life. By creating and sharing digital content, these young people used ICT as a tool for empowerment and participation. Thus, socially-marginalized youth engaged in specific cultural circuits may benefit from ICT use differently than socially disadvantaged youth in general, underlining the fact that ICT use amongst vulnerable youth is divergent.

Previous research shows that ICT offers vulnerable young people information and social support that can enhance their ability to cope with their difficulties in life. ICT can also function as an arena for socializing and social integration, and for reflecting on their identities both in relation to peers in similar situations and to peers living under ordinary circumstances.

My research contributes a Finnish perspective to research regarding ICT use among vulnerable youth. Finnish young people outside education and employment have been the subject of previous research as they are considered at risk of becoming economically and socially marginalized (Rinne and Järvinen 2011; Vanttaja and Järvinen 2006). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research considering the use of ICT and digital inclusion among this group. Finland is a country with a high rate of internet access among young people, and it is therefore important to study how this group of young people who experience an offline participation gap make use of and engage through ICT.

Uses and gratification as tools for analysis

The review of research on media use among youth presented above, indicates that young people are independent actors making their own choices considering which available media they use, and how. Some even chose not to use media at all, therefore I decided to adopt a uses and gratification approach as a tool for the analysis of the data in this study. The theory suggests that users actively choose to use media which satisfies their personal needs and wishes, or fulfills other individual motives (Blumler and Katz 1974). In their presentation of the action/motivation perspective of uses and gratification theory, McQuail and Gurevitch (1974, 295) emphasize the importance of "adopting a general scientific open-mindedness" when studying the motives behind media use. They also stress that media users "act of free choice" in order to gain some benefits, or "to be or do what he wishes". The supervisors of the training programs in this study claimed that their young clients used media (ICT) mostly for entertainment. Regardless of this, I wanted to explore how the young themselves perceive and talk about their motives for media use. According to McQuail's typology of individual motives for media use (1983), the four main motives for using media and communication technologies are: (1) information, (2) personal identity, (3) entertainment, and (4) integration and social interaction (Table 1). McQuail includes entertainment as one of the main motives for individual media use and therefore I chose this specific typology as a framework for my analysis, where my aim was to specifically explore my respondents' entertainment oriented media use, among other usage types.

Table 1 The main motives for using media and communication technologies

Information

- Finding out about immediate surroundings, society and the world
- Seeking advice on practical matters
- Satisfying curiosity
- Learning

Integration and Social Interaction

- Gaining insight into the circumstances of others
- Gaining sense of belonging
- Finding basis for conversation
- Substitute for real-life companionship
- Connection with family, friends and society

Personal Identity

- Reinforcement of personal values
- Finding models of behavior
- Identifying with valued others
- Gaining insight into oneself

Entertainment

- Escaping from problems
- Relaxation
- Cultural and aesthetic enjoyment
- Filling time
- Emotional release
- Sexual arousal

Source:

Kilian, Hennigs and Langner (2012) referring to McQuail (1993) and Meyen (2004)

The research setting

I collected the data in two training programs for young people aged 16-26, who were outside education and employment in the Helsinki area (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Kauniainen and Kirkkonummi). The research was planned and conducted in co-operation with the supervisors for the programs, and with the consent of the programs' managing director. The professional supervisors for the programs have degrees in education and social sciences, and had previous experience of working with young people in schools as either special education teachers or counselors.

The first training program offers low-threshold activities, four days a week, from 10 am to 2 pm. Participation in the program is optional, and the purpose is to offer social support and meaningful daytime activities for youth who have dropped out of school

or working life. Some of the participants in this program are outside employment and education due to health or mental health problems, and others lack motivation or social skills. The program aims to enhance their basic everyday skills and emphasizes social skills. Underlining the focus on social skills, the two professional supervisors for the program are called 'social coaches'. The young people attending the program survive either on social benefits or have no income at all.

The second program is considered as a labor market policy measure, and participants are entitled to unemployment benefits when participating in the activities five days per week. Although the young people attending this program also experience difficulties in life, they are already planning their next steps and are actively looking for a study place or a job. The two professionals supervising this program are a qualified teacher and a social worker, and are called 'job coaches'.

I started each interview by informing and reminding the participants about the purpose of my research and how the data was going to be used and analyzed. Each participant was asked for written consent. The program supervisors made a few requests about the conduct of the interviews, one of which was not to touch upon the participants' personal problems. This request had a certain impact on the topics that could be discussed. Other requests concerned specific topics the supervisors wanted to include in the interviews, for example questions about internet addiction and online bullying.

The names in the excerpts are fabricated. Specific places or people mentioned by the youth are left out to protect the anonymity of participants.

The respondents

The interviews were carried out as part of the daily activities during the programs. The group configuration varied according to which of the young people were present when the interviews took place. Eleven young people aged 18-26 participated in the interviews - seven females and four males. A group interview was also conducted with the four supervisors. Table 2 gives more information on interview participation.

Table 2 The data collection.

	Group interview 1	Group interview 2	Group interview 3	Individual interviews
Training program 1	5 women, 1 man	4 women, 2 men	4 women, 1 man	2 women, 1 man
Training program 2	1 woman, 2 men	1 woman, 1 man	2 women, 1 man	
Supervisors	2 women, 2 men			

Eleven (11) young adults and four (4) supervisors were interviewed, in the constellations presented above.

All of the participants had finished a compulsory nine years of primary education. None of the participants were currently in education, and had either never started or dropped out of further education.

Interviews

The data was collected in January-April 2014. Three separate interview sessions were conducted with the youth present at each training program. I expected that the young people who were close in age would inspire and encourage each other to discuss different perspectives of their ICT use, and therefore I decided to interview them in a group setting (Tracy 2013, 167). As Tracy (2013, 173) points out, group interviews are hard to plan and it is not easy to predict the behaviors of participants. In this study, the participants were less talkative and some stayed silent during the sessions, even when addressed directly. To enrich the data, three of the participants were interviewed individually. The supervisors of the training programs asked for volunteers for individual interviews, and two women and one man ended up as respondents. The four supervisors of the programs were interviewed as a separate group, one time only.

The first interview session focused on the history of ICT use, and we discussed the use of ICT in the participants' childhood and early youth. The participants drew a timeline noting ICT related events such as when they got their first mobile phone, their first e-mail address and first computer. I used these timelines to clarify what was said during the interviews when analyzing the data. In the second session we

discussed the daily use of ICT; how much time was spent online and the purpose of the ICT use– e.g. for entertainment or for performing everyday tasks. The third session focused on the future. In this discussion, themes like difficult situations in life and the opportunities and threats associated with ICT use were touched upon. We also discussed what life would be like without the internet. The aim of conducting the interviews in three different sessions (each focusing on ICT use at different points in the participants' lives), was to give participants a chance to reflect on the developments in ICT that had occurred during their lifetime. It involved making them reflect on these developments in general and on how they had affected their individual ICT use over time, extending even to consider the use and meaning they saw for ICT in the future. The group interviews ended up taking between 40-70 minutes, and individual interviews took about 20 minutes each. I recorded the group interviews on video and audiotaped the individual interviews. I transcribed the interviews, ending up with 99 pages of text data in total.

Findings

The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2011). The data was first coded, focusing on what youth themselves had said about how and for what purposes they used ICT. The codes were then merged and divided into four categories according to McQuail's (1983) typology. The results of the study are presented below, divided into four sections: (1) information, (2) personal identity, (3) entertainment, and (4) integration and social interaction. The analysis of the interviews with the youths is presented interlaced with the analysis of the interview which took place with the supervisors.

Information

ICT is seen as an important source of information with practical uses for the young people in this study. They used online services or mobile apps when checking weather forecasts, maps and routes, or when finding schedules for public transportation. The young people mentioned banking and contacting authorities such as the tax office or Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland) as practical matters to which they preferred attending to online.

The young people were asked to reflect on how they would seek advice in a situation where they felt physically ill or were in some kind of emotional distress (for example fighting with parents or friends, or feeling lonely). The participants answered that their actions would depend on how severe the symptoms of the illness or distress would be. In cases of severe illness, they would prefer talking to someone either face-to-face or on the phone. In less severe cases of illness, participants would use the internet to look for answers, or call the official health information number and ask for help. In a situation involving emotional stress or a disagreement with someone close, participants preferred to discuss the situation face-to-face with the person involved or with a friend. These results are surprising, as previous research (Granholm 2010; Johnsen et al. 2002; Ybarra and Eaton 2005) shows that many (young) people feel it is easier to share and discuss difficult situations and problems in their lives using technology. Clearly, people still have needs that they prefer to fill without using media intervention.

When talking about how they would tackle loneliness, a few participants mentioned online forums that offer peer support. These participants expressed that they wanted more online hotlines, especially services with professionals available to answer messages. This is to be taken seriously, as it highlights the need for increasing the professionally supervised online services which are currently available for youth.

Both youth and supervisors agreed that following news and keeping up to date with what was going on locally or more globally (as McQuail (1983) puts it "finding out about immediate surroundings, society and the world"), was less important for the young people in this study. A few of the young people mentioned having the habit of glancing through a daily newspaper either online or in paper format. Some read the news now and then, but none of the youth participants listened to news on the radio or watched news on TV. In the interview with the supervisors, they discussed the fact that even though many of the young people attending the training programs are online "all the time", they have difficulties finding sensible information and seem unaware of what was going on in the world:

> Eva: *Or that they are online that much, but don't know what, for example, is on the news.*
>
> Tom and Mike: *No, they don't.*
>
> Eva: *So, I don't really know what they do when they are surfing, but the world around them seems to pass them by, wars and natural disasters and*

> *presidential elections, everything just passes them by or in a way doesn't reach them. It feels like some kind of escapism, they look for entertainment sites, it should be fun and nice and easygoing, that's what's tempting.*
>
> Maria: *If it's boring or a little bit strenuous…*
>
> Eva: *…then you don't go there again.*

Preferring online information seeking with aims other than keeping up-to-date with daily news is seen to reflect the news habits of youth in general (e.g. Spurgeon et al. 2012). When discussing the positive features of ICT use with the supervisors, they mentioned accessing information for learning purposes. Some young people used their smartphones to look things up and to learn more about the topics discussed in the daily activities of the program. Looking up information for the purpose of satisfying curiosity and learning can also be considered as entertainment, as the following excerpt from the individual interview with Elisa shows:

> Researcher: *Do you feel that you use the internet as entertainment or as a utility?*
>
> Elisa: *Well, maybe to me it's entertaining in a way to learn new things, so it's both.*
>
> Researcher: *Yes, so it's a blend of entertainment and utility.*
>
> Elisa: *Yeah.*

This finding points out that ICT use among young people is diverse in many ways, and that it can satisfy several needs at once (Herring 2008; Lee 2005; Westlund and Bjur 2014).

Personal Identity

The young respondents were not working or attending school at the time of the interviews. Therefore they did not belong to communities where most of their peers would spend a considerable amount of time each day. However, they still needed to gain reinforcement for their personal values, to find behavioral models, and to identify with and gain insight into others. In this context, it could be seen that in one way or another, participants used entertainment (such as movies, film clips, TV series,

music, blogs, pictures and social media) as a source of building materials for their personal identities. Yet, there are young people who choose to actively stay outside and minimize their use of ICT and (social) media. It is important to be aware of this group, as they fulfill their needs for personal identity differently from their peers, and therefore challenge the typology presented by McQuail (1983).

The different features of media often blend together. Among the phenomena discussed during the interviews, social media can probably be seen to fit all four features considering personal identity (see Table 1), as shown in the following excerpt:

> Ida: *Tumblr. I like.*
>
> Researcher: *What is it about Tumblr…*
>
> Anna: *It's just, I don't know, people just put up a lot of pictures there.*
>
> Ida: *And then I think it's kind of less of those hate messages and stuff. Well, of course you can find them everywhere but most of the people I follow or talk to are very open-minded and have the same values as I have. I don't know, it's just my kind of people there.*

These respondents talk about reinforcing their values by following and talking to people who they feel they share values with. By following, talking to and looking at pictures posted by online acquaintances, they also find out how other young people look, what they do and how they act. In other words, the young people in this study, like youth in general, use ICT to look for new models of behavior and people to identify with (Boyd 2008; Wildermuth & Dalsgaard 2006). One of the young women states that she finds "her kind of people" on Tumblr, which infers that she has been reflecting on what kind of person she is and what kind of person she wants to be.

Not all the participants used social media. There were a few who wanted to purposely live their lives without it and minimize the use of ICT in everyday communication. One of the main considerations they mentioned as an argument for their decision was that everything we do online is monitored, and they didn't want to leave any digital trace:

> Researcher: *Have you been on FB, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr or something like that today?*
>
> Elisa: *No, I don't do any of those at all.*

Researcher: *Yes, I remember you were saying something like that during the group interview. Is it a deliberate choice?*

Eliza: *Yeah, I've never had any of those.*

Researcher: *How is it with your friends, do you talk a lot about things that happen on Facebook or the like?*

Jacob: *Social media is cancer.*

Nicke: *I think it's fucking vain, I am rarely on the computer and the net. I want to leave as small an internet footprint as possible. People don't get that if you write something on Facebook then fucking anybody can read what you have done there, and where you live, and what you do during the day. One can stalk you so damn easily, and they can use it against you. I'm not going along with that…*

This is in line with the findings by Westlund and Bjur (2014) and contradicts the assumptions that all young people are deeply involved with social media. A disassociation from social media could be interpreted as a way for young people to define themselves. By distancing themselves from social media (and those who use social media) they draw their personal lines, protect their private lives, and reinforce their personal values.

 In the interviews with the supervisors, the connection of media use to identity was also touched upon. The supervisors viewed that shy people could use social media as a tool for finding models of behavior. They took Facebook as an example and cases where young people who were very shy in person, posted a lot of pictures of themselves and updated their status with, for example, how much weight they had lost. They also reflected on how getting 'likes' on Facebook affects these types of people, and how it can become a vicious circle, or spiral, where the young people disclose more and more, in order to get more and more likes:

Eva: *… And then you might get hooked on getting those 'likes' and when you lose a few more kilos you get some more 'likes', and then you get some more 'likes' … The more you tell and disclose and the less clothes you wear, the more 'likes' you get… […] But particularly for a person who is quite lonely and*

doesn't have very many social connections, a person like that might get the reinforcement directly on Facebook, instantly, which they don't get face-to-face from other people because they have nobody close.

This way of using ICT to obtain reinforcement and as models for self-destructive behavior has been previously discussed by researchers. Online websites, blogs and discussion groups where participants support and encourage each other's eating disorders are examples of self-destructive online behavior, and have been studied by academics for over a decade (for example Giles 2006; Figueras Bates 2014). It is important for social work professionals to be aware of these types of negative online behavior.

Integration and Social Interaction

Almost all of the young people interviewed used ICT to keep in touch with friends. For some, social media, Skyping, texting or using instant messaging applications were a way of socializing. For others, ICT was a tool for setting up a meeting face-to-face. Some preferred calling friends and the way the young people contacted their friends depended both on the friend and the urgency of the matter:

> Ida: *It depends on which friend. I use WhatsApp with some, and text messages with others, Kik with a third one, and some I like to call.*
>
> Researcher: *Does anybody call their friends?*
>
> Ida: *I do, sometimes. If it's like that I want to call and ask 'Do you want to meet' then I call, but if I have a general question, I text. And sometimes texting feels like too much trouble, and then I just call.*
>
> Malin: *I usually use the phone, try to set up a meeting face-to-face.*
>
> Researcher: *Do you call or text?*
>
> Malin: *I usually call.*
>
> Researcher: *So you prefer meeting face-to-face?*
>
> Malin: *Yes.*

The young people who preferred calling or talking to people face-to-face were also the ones who stated that they felt insecure with their ICT skills. A lack of appropriate education (Van Deursen et al. 2014) and/or general illiteracy (Cranmer 2010) may provide an explanation for this, in that ICT and social media are still mostly based on communication through text which is challenging for those who have difficulties reading and writing.

Some use ICT as a substitute for real-life companionship when connecting with family and friends who live further away. ICT was also seen as necessary for keeping in touch and socializing with those closer to home. Earlier research has shown that young people use ICT mostly for socializing with people they know in person (Thulin and Vilhelmson 2007). When asked if they had made any new acquaintances online, most respondents stated that they only socialized with people they knew face-to-face. One person had found new friends online, but was now socializing with those people offline too. This blended way of social interaction seems to be typical for young people, either socializing online with friends they have come to know offline, or in integrating friends they have made online as a part of their life offline.

The supervisors at the training programs use Facebook as a tool when interacting with clients. All four supervisors have professional Facebook profiles and they invite the training program participants to become Facebook friends. The supervisors mostly use Facebook as a tool for communication when other attempts to contact the young people fail. It is hard to just disappear on Facebook, as the platform shows when you are online:

> Tom: *Yeah, sometimes they don't answer the phone when we call but then when you send them a message on Facebook they can talk. It is easier somehow.*

> Maria: *I was calling one of the youths, it was a few weeks ago and he didn't answer. Tom was logged in on Facebook, saw that he was logged in at the same time and sent him a message saying 'Maria is calling now, please pick up the phone.' And I called and he picked up and all of this happened during three or four minutes.*

Using Facebook at the training programs has also caused some ethical considerations to be raised among supervisors, as no official guidelines of how social media should be used in their work exist. One challenge is to decide what to do with young people

who no longer participated in the programs. Should they just unfriend them or keep them among their friends? And if they keep them as friends, how should they consider any information they receive about their former clients' private lives? As they are former clients, supervisors have no authority to take action even if they discover that someone is falling off track. These problems are familiar to other social and welfare professionals who have let ICT creep in to their everyday practice without the considering the consequences (Mishna et al. 2012). Discussing ICT use with colleague and determining joint guidelines for practice could be one way to avoid confusion.

Entertainment

The young people stated that they used ICT mostly for entertainment. Listening to music and watching movies, TV-series and short video clips online was popular among all participants. Reading blogs, looking at pictures that other people had posted online and playing online games were also activities which were mentioned. Most of the participants had a Facebook account. While these activities fit well into the entertainment category, they can also be interpreted as ways for young people to gain an insight into the circumstances of others, gain a sense of belonging, and to find a basis for conversation (McQuail 1983). The extensive use of ICT for entertainment purposes can also be considered as a tool for participation, and through their engagement with ICT entertainment platforms, participants stay up to date with what is happening in the field of youth culture. Thus, they can feel part of this culture, even though they may be currently outside the spheres of employment or education that would normally provide an arena for interaction with people their own age.

The supervisors at the programs were deeply concerned regarding what they considered to be an excessive entertainment focus of ICT use among their young clients. Research (e.g. Matzat and Sadowski 2011; van Deursen et al. 2011) shows that intense internet use does not improve digital skills in general. These young people are mostly familiar with the entertainment related features of the internet, but do not necessarily have the skills needed to access other content online. The supervisors also felt concern for the risks of becoming addicted to online games or social media, and even to the smartphone device itself. A few of the participants felt that they sometime spent more time online than planned, or started surfing when they actually had other things such as homework to do. Still, none of the participants in this study felt that they were

addicted to ICT and they all thought they would easily be able to live without the internet or their phone for a period of time.

For the participants in this study, entertainment can be viewed as a sanctuary - a place where you can go and forget about the difficulties of everyday life, or in McQuail's (1987, 73) terms, "escaping from problems, relaxation, and cultural and aesthetic enjoyment". Many of the young people also talked about using ICT in terms of filling time:

> Researcher: *Have you been on Facebook more than once (today)?*
>
> Anna: *Yes, I have it on my phone so when you don't have anything to do it is easy to go in. I don't look at anything in particular, I'm just scrolling through.*

There are two types of ICT use that can be considered as filling time, to be found in the data. The first type is the filling of shorter gaps between activities or while on the move, for example by checking things on the smartphone while waiting for a bus. The other type is more of a way of passing longer periods of time during nights or weekends. This involves checking things on the smartphone, going online using tablets or computers, and also using console games. Both types of filling time can involve elements of escaping problems, relaxation, or cultural and aesthetic enjoyment, however using ICT as an emotional release or for sexual arousal did not come up in the interviews.

Discussions

I have analyzed the ICT use of a vulnerable group of Finnish young people who participated in training programs for youth outside education and employment. The aim of the study was to give voice to these young people who had been described by the supervisors of their training programs as excessive, entertainment oriented users of ICT. Most of the young people in this study did indeed use ICT for entertainment, to watch movies and TV-series, to listen to music, and to play computer games. However previous research (e.g. Cranmer 2010; Wildermuth and Dalsgaard 2006) shows that these are common activities among marginalized youth who are seeking role models or who wish to keep abreast of the latest developments in youth culture. Both previous research as well as my own study indicates that ICT use for entertainment can be an inclusive experience for young people who are outside employment or education and who may lack daily ordinary interaction with peers.

According to the uses and gratification approach, people choose to fulfill their needs with a certain type of media, based on their previous experiences (Blumler and Katz 1974). This means that if people lack experience of a certain type of media, the probability that they will turn to it when they are in need is less likely. Furthermore, people have needs that they prefer to fill without using media. An example of this also provides the most important finding of this study: in contradiction to the results of earlier studies (e.g. Granholm 2010; Johnsen et al, 2002; Ybarra & Eaton 2005), the young people in this research wanted to talk to someone face-to-face in situations they felt were physically or emotionally severe. The young people in this study were already in contact with helping professionals. As such they had already taken the initial step for seeking help (possibly by seeking information online) and a network of people who could offer support had started to form around them. Even though ICT skills were not discussed in these interviews, another possible explanation could be that young people in this context lack the skills needed to find help online, perhaps because their ICT use is generally oriented towards entertainment. In less severe situations however, the young people stated that they could use the internet as a means to seek a solution to a problem and expressed a wish for more professionally supervised online hotline services. Thus, in order to benefit from online content in a more versatile way, young people need to improve their ICT skills through education and training.

Most of the youth in this study were active users of social media, but some participants stated that they actively avoided it and choose other means for fulfilling their needs for social interaction. This media behavior indicates that media and ICT use among more marginalized young people is not homogenous (see also Herring 2008; Lee 2005; Westlund and Bjur 2014). Overall however, young people choose the tools and the dimension for interaction that best fulfilled their needs.

My research has the following implications for social and youth services: Youth and social work would benefit from applying an open-minded approach when providing services to young people. Adults working with youth need to be careful when making assumptions about ICT use among their clients. This aspect is of great importance, especially for professionals working with excluded or marginalized young people. No exaggerations should be made about either the risks and dangers, or the opportunities and benefits of ICT. It is important to keep in mind that not all young people choose to participate in the online dimension, and that there are particular situations in which the young prefer face-to-face interaction. The challenge for future social and

youth services is to be present both online and offline, so providing easily accessible information and blended practices.

Future research

My qualitative study included eleven Finnish young people outside employment and education. In order to obtain a broader and more transferable picture of the phenomenon in future studies, a larger number of respondents is needed. Especially, the specific difficulties and problems which have led young people to drop out of education and the labor market need to be considered. A participatory methodology involving young people themselves is essential in research that aims at developing tools that could be used to support and prevent these youths from further marginalization.

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IV What can social work practice learn from research on online support groups?

Camilla Granholm and Vilma Lehtinen

Abstract

This article presents a selective review of scholarly approaches to online support groups, in order to assess the relevance of current research to social work practice, and to suggest future directions. We have found that methodological individualism thrives in the literature, and studies on issues such as the dynamics of the client and the professional in online support are comparatively rare. With our focus on client work, we argue that the development of social work practices would benefit from a more explicit investigation of the interaction between clients and professionals in research concerning online support groups.

Keywords:
online support groups, online social work, selective literature review, social support, Doise categorization model

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies have become a central part of our everyday life, and people suffering from emotional distress or physical illnesses often look for advice and support online. NGO's have acknowledged the opportunities that online tools can provide people in difficult situations, and many now offer help and support on the internet. Organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous (http://aa-intergroup.org) and Parents, Family & Friends of Suicides (www.pos-ffos.com) provide their clients with online support groups, but in public sector social work practice these types of services are still quite rare. The benefit of online groups is the interaction between clients and the support they can give to each other. Using online group settings that are open to view for those other than the group participants can also benefit a large number of people with similar problems (Meier 2008).

The starting point of this article is that social work, and especially group work practices, would benefit from a stronger collaboration with researchers who study online support groups. When it comes to blending online practice into social work with groups, some researchers suggest that the first step could be to introduce existing online groups to clients who may benefit from them (Meier 2004; 2011; Zamani et al. 2013). We argue that to realize this aim, more practice-oriented social work research is needed.

The goal of this study is to explore existing research on online support groups that would be beneficial for developing online social work group practice. For this purpose, we assess the current state of the art by way of a selective literature review. Traditionally, review articles provide an overview of the knowledge produced on a specific topic. In that sense, this article is not traditional as the focus of the review is on the research itself. We are interested in the scientific positioning and perspectives on online support groups, as presented in the research selected for this review.

We focused our enquiry on the term *online support group* as it is used in scholarly literature to refer to the aspects of social work we are interested in: online interaction, the aim of providing support, and a group format. Wood & Smith (1995, 117) defined the concept as *"a type of social support group that meets online and provides participants the opportunity to give and receive positive feedback to and from another"*. The activity of sharing social support over the internet defines an online support group, more than the particular technical platform on which these activities occur. Platforms for online support groups vary from e-mail lists to groups formed on social networking services. These groups tend to be self-organized without professionals facilitating the discussions, and often, some of the participants take the role of a moderator (Tanis 2007). Online platforms specially organized by professionals do however exist. In this review, we are interested in studies involving both facilitated and self-organized groups, to assess whether the studies on online support groups approach their topics from the viewpoint of the client or the professional, or from a wider organizational or societal perspective. Additionally, we study social work practice which puts the clients in focus, and as such we have not considered support groups aimed at social work students or practitioners.

Based on our review, in existing state of the art studies on online support groups the role of the professional is portrayed as marginal. To strengthen the relevance of this research for the development of social work practices, we argue that a more explicit

investigation of the interaction between clients and professionals is needed. Finally, we offer possible solutions which may help to implement this approach to developing future research on online support groups in social work practice.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This review examines the levels of analysis by which online support groups have been approached in social scientific research. To reflect this aim, we focused on databases that cover the field of social sciences, including social services. These include EBSCO (Academic Search Complete), ProQuest, and Web of Science.

We examined these databases for peer-reviewed journal publications with the search term "online support group" in their abstract. We focused our enquiry on *online* support groups, so as to emphasize interaction which occurs through networks of computers connected to the internet, i.e. computers online. We excluded parallel concepts such as *computer-supported, computer-mediated, electronic and virtual support groups* to emphasize the connectivity and human interaction, and not just the devices used. We expected this framing to be sufficiently illustrative for the purposes of demonstrating the relative prevalence of different approaches in studies of online support groups. Moreover, in practice, the focus on the term *online support group* was not as exclusive, as we noticed that the parallel concepts were used interchangeably even within a single publication.

Altogether, the searches of the three databases returned 128 publications. The time span of publication covered a period from 1997 to January 2016. Several publications (49) appeared in each of the three databases. We excluded 43 publications that mentioned online support groups mainly as research material for studying other phenomena (such as the construction of the online self), or as a site for recruiting subjects. Thus, we included 85 publications for further analysis, spanning a period from 2003 to 2015.

The search returned only publications in English, probably due to the use of an English search term. The online support groups featured were mostly Anglophone, with the majority of the participants being from the US, UK and Australia. Not all of the publications mentioned the languages used in the online support groups that they studied, but we assume that these were likely to be Anglophone as the authors

analyzing the material were Anglophone speakers. A few publications however (n=17) studied non-Anglophone online support groups, including those conducted in German, Dutch, Israeli, and Chinese.

The search returned research articles from a wide variety of journals. Altogether, studies from 58 different journals were included in this review, with the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* appearing most frequently (n=8). In addition to journals that focused on computer-mediated communication, the search also returned journals targeted towards health practitioners, such as *Patient Education and Counseling* (n=4), *Psycho-Oncology* (n=4), and the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (n=4). Many of the journals featured in the returns cover the particular issue that the support group in question is concerned with, for example *Archives of Suicide Research* (n=2), *Gastroenterology Nursing* (n=1) and *Appetite* (n=1).

To assess how well current literature manages to meet the needs of developing online social work practice, we use Doise's (1986) categorization of the levels of explanation in experimental social psychology as our framework. Doise's framework allows us to distinguish those levels of analysis which may be lacking and those which are over-represented. Doise's categorization includes four levels: 1) the intra-personal level 2) the inter-personal and situational level 3) the positional level, and 4) the ideological level. With the intra-personal level, Doise refers to changes such as those in an individual's wellbeing, their emotions or opinions that can be measured by analyzing the individual. The inter-personal level and situational level extends this view to phenomena occurring either between individuals or within a situation, such as processes of interaction within a group. The positional level introduces the social categories that the participants in the interaction situation represent, such as their different ethnic group or social status, and assesses how these affect the interaction between the individuals. Studies on the ideological level consider the larger cultural context of the interaction. They examine how the values, norms and understandings shared within a culture are formed in interaction, and how they affect the way we orient ourselves to each other and to our surroundings. As Doise (1986) stresses, these levels are not a reflection of reality, but analytical distinctions that researchers make to help focus the issue they aim to address within their studies.

In regard to social work with groups, Doise's (1986) levels could be interpreted as follows: On the intra-personal level, the group is used as a tool when dealing with an individual client's personal problems. It is the level where the client is directed to the

group to get help and support with coping with and solving existing problems, or to prevent the occurrence of anticipated problems. On the inter-personal and situational level, interaction between clients is essential. The group members can support each other in maintaining a level of functioning if a risk of deterioration occurs. The positional level can be interpreted as the level which addresses client-professional interaction in a group. This interaction is especially important in professionally-led groups with an educational or therapeutic character. Finally, we modified Doise's ideological level according to our interests. We chose to term the ideological level as the organizational/societal level, and this allows us to identify whether the studies reviewed situate online support groups in their organizational or societal context.

FINDINGS

In the following section, we first present how our sample of studies on online support groups adapted to each level of analysis of the framework. This illustrates how the levels of analysis occur in these publications from a qualitative perspective, and also how the levels differ from each other. Finally, we summarize the distribution of these approaches within our sample, and depict which approaches appear together. This qualitative examination of our sample gives an insight as to how the different viewpoints expressed in the studies of online support groups could be used to further develop social work practice.

Drawing from the abstracts of the 85 publications included in the study, we analyzed their descriptions of the research problem, so as to categorize them into one or more of the levels of our framework. Doise (1986) reminds us that a single study can reflect multiple levels of analysis, and this is also the case with our review. Rather than categorizing individual publications with a single strictly defined analytical approach, our main interest is to reveal the prevalence of a variety of analytical levels. Thus, one publication may be categorized to one or more categories. Within this paper, we provide some illustrative examples of the publications included in each level of the analysis.

Intra-personal level: Individual client

On the intra-personal level, we identified expressions that were interpreted to represent analysis undertaken on the client level. The publications focused on how the individual

client's intrapersonal processes were affected by their participation in an online support group, and vice versa, how individual factors affected the probability of participating in online support groups, and how such participation affected the individual. We distinguished three types of empirical investigation that serve to assess these effects: self-report measures, observations, and qualitative analyses of open-ended questions. This level of analysis was the most prevalent in our analysis, being identified in 57 instances.

The majority of the instances included in this level (n=23) assess the effects of online support groups by using survey questionnaires consisting of established psychological self-report measures. For example, measures of depression such as the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression [CES-D] scale and its revised version (CESD-R) were used to assess the effects of organized online support groups (see, e.g. Klemm 2012; Lieberman et al. 2003; Lieberman et al. 2005). Mostly, the studies indicate that participation in the online support group correlated with decreased depression levels as measured with these scales. However, Batenburg & Das (2014) claim that active participation in an online support group decreases levels of depression only if the participants score highly on emotional expression.

Eight studies included in this level assessed the precedents of participation in an online support group, rather than its effects. The studies used self-reports to identify intra-individual factors that are connected with the probability of joining online support groups, such as a problem-focused coping style (Wright & Rains 2014), the clinical profile of the condition that the group relates to (Darcy and Dooley 2007), and perceived vulnerability and self-efficacy (McKinley & Ruppel 2014). Mo and Coulson (2010a) distinguished between different types of participation. In their questionnaire, the respondents self-reported whether they had ever posted any messages to the group, or whether they only read the messages. Then, the authors compared the "posters" to the "lurkers", in regard to a range of psychological measures, including the CESD-R. Posters were found to be more satisfied with their relationships with other group members than lurkers. However, the authors concluded that online support groups could also be beneficial for lurkers, given that no significant differences were found.

Nine of the publications addressing the intra-individual level observed the interactions in an online support group. While social support was operationalized with self-report measures by Malik and Coulson (2011a) and Mo and Coulson (2010b), Tichon and Yellowlees (2003) observed the use of clauses that they interpreted as support, to argue that social support can be acquired in online support groups. Barak and Dolev-Cohen

(2006) and Kernsmith and Kernsmith (2008) operationalized participation by calculating the number of messages posted. They found that higher activity levels in the group correlated with benefits such as lower levels of distress. Love et al. (2012) and Frost and Massagli (2008) categorized the contents of online support groups, and concluded that individuals use the groups for purposes such as coping with "difficult emotions through expression" (Love et al. 2012, 555) and "to foster and solidify relationships based on shared concerns" (Frost & Massagli 2008). They did not however compare how the acquisition of these benefits related to the level of participation in the groups.

Shaw et al. (2007; 2008) and Han et al. (2012) connected observations to survey measures. Shaw et al. (2007; 2008) observed online interaction by using word counting programs. They found that the use of first-person pronouns correlates with survey measures of negative emotions. The use of religion-related words was negatively correlated to negative emotions, and positively correlated to functional well-being and self-efficacy. Han et al. (2012) examined the precedents of online support group participation instead of its effects, and found that even patients diagnosed with the same condition, differ in their ways of using an online support group.

A further 15 publications in our review assessed the benefits of online support groups with a data-driven approach to open-ended survey questions. In general, the authors identified benefits that participants in online support groups claimed to experience by analyzing answers to open-ended questions. The authors identified such benefits as the online group providing opportunities for: *"exchanging stories", "gaining hope"* (Hess et al. 2010, 220), *"access to a more heterogeneous mix of people"* (Coulson & Knibb 2007, 147), *"accessible and safe environments in which to discuss difficult topics in privacy"* (Street et al. 2012, 1). However, Holbrey and Coulson (2013) and Mo and Coulson (2014) point out some possibly disempowering processes of participating in online support groups, such as "[r]eading about the negative experiences of others" (Holbrey & Coulson 2013, 51) or "declining real life relationships" (Mo & Coulson 2013, 983). Our interpretation is that these analyses aim to catch participants' individual experiences of online support groups and therefore connect to the intra-individual level. However, one publication that we included in this category but considered to represent all of the subcategories, is Barak et al.'s (2008) review on studies that cover the benefits and costs that participation in online support groups provides for the individual. The review provides an overview of the factors that *"potentially affect participants"* (p. 1867), and this description offers a good illustration of the research that we include on the level of the individual client.

Inter-personal level: Interaction between clients

Reflecting on Doise's inter-personal level, we identified studies that approached the topic on the level of interaction between specific individuals in online support groups. Instead of focusing on intra-individual processes, the studies in this category included the emergence of social support in the observed interactions between members of online support groups. We determined 34 instances of studies falling under this approach, and identified three types of studies which focus on interaction between clients: 1) content analysis to identify support, 2) approaching support as an interpersonal process; and 3) operationalizing online interaction to analyze the effects of different types of interaction.

The most common method used in these studies was content analysis, using the messages posted in online support groups as research material. In the studies using content analysis (n = 31), we distinguished two types of goals. Sixteen (16) studies assessed the amount of interaction in the online support groups, and studied phenomena such as *"social support"* (Coulson et al. 2007, 175; Shi & Chen 2014), *"empathy"* (Kernsmith and Kernsmith 2008, 226), or *"self-help mechanisms"* (Malik and Coulson 2011b, 439). We identified 15 studies which did not impose predefined concepts upon the content, but instead focused on the processes through which the phenomenon of interest (such as social support) was produced in the interactions between the group members.

In addition to content analysis, three studies employed the tracking of posted messages (Klemm 2012; Gilat & Sharar 2007) and self-reports (Klemm 2012; Lieberman et al. 2005). These methods were used to operationalize how features of interaction, such as the level of moderation in groups (Klemm 2012), or the homogeneity of the group (Lieberman et al. 2005) contributed to the effectiveness of the group.

Positional level: Client–professional interaction

Studies that were placed in Doise's positional level view online support groups not solely from within the group, but also as situations in which individuals who represent different social positions interact with each other. As our interest is on features that can potentially be used in social work, we focus on studies that cover the relations between the positions of the client and professional. The amount of the instances

positioned in this category was considerably smaller than in previous categories. Only eight (8) instances of this approach occurred within our sample. Three of these instances pinpointed the effects of having a professional or trained volunteer to moderate the group or to interact with the clients. The benefits are cited to include increased participation (Klemm 2012), less frequent threats of suicide (Gilat & Sharar 2007), and various psychological benefits (Lepore et al. 2011). Three further instances analyze the strategies that professionals use, such as *"work-arounds' for addressing shortcomings of the internet as a medium for delivering psychosocial services"* (Owen et al. 2009, 144), and strategies for managing distress when interacting with clients (Gilat et al. 2011; 2012). Furthermore, two studies addressed the implications of participation in online support groups for client-professional relationships. Coulson and Knibb (2007) surveyed how online support group participants used information acquired in the group with their healthcare providers, and found that *"not all health professionals appeared to welcome such empowered patients"* (Coulson & Knibb 2007, 147). Stewart Loane & D'Alessandro (2014) were more hopeful in arguing that *"The traditional asymmetric relationship between patient and doctor is challenged by this new form of educated, empowered health consumer who is able to work in partnership with medical service providers"*. Both observations point towards the broader question of the organizational and societal issues that online support groups touch upon. A concrete example of this concerns how professionals adjust to the knowledge that clients acquire from online support groups (Coulson & Knibb 2007). However, we found out that a vast majority of the publications in our sample did not define their research problem on this more abstract level.

Ideological level: Organizational and societal

We included two (2) studies in the organizational and societal category. In a participatory case study, Radin (2006) explicitly claims that online support groups function as a *"political action"*, permitting clients to challenge the authority of professionals and thus empower non-professionals in new ways. The second publication included in this category was Stewart et al.'s (2011) study on the effectiveness of an online support group to support parents of children with a condition. This study differs from studies that we placed in other categories, as it involves the clients in the iterative development of the system. While Stewart et al. (2011) detaches the online support group from its societal surroundings, they

still consider it as a system that involves a range of actors from the client to the professional, and including the developers of the system.

To summarize the overall distribution of viewpoints identified in our sample, the studies mainly appear to be targeted towards the client. We identified 57 instances of the *intra-individual* level of analysis. *Interaction between clients* was identified in 34 instances. We identified only eight instances involving the viewpoint of the professional, and at the *organizational and societal* level that reflects Doise's ideological level, the number of identified instances was two.

We identified 45 publications which solely represented the viewpoint of the *client*. In ten cases we identified the viewpoint of the *client* to be represented simultaneously with an *interaction between clients* approach. In a further four cases, the viewpoint of the client was represented simultaneously with the level of *client-professional interaction*. The *organizational/societal* level overlapped with other levels in both of the instances we positioned under it: in the case of Stewart et al. (2011) it overlapped with the *individual* level, and in Radin (2006) it overlapped with the *interaction between clients* approach.

DISCUSSION

To determine gaps in the research (especially concerning knowledge that would be useful for the development of social work practices), Doise's framework of the levels of analysis in experimental social psychology allowed us to discern the relative prevalence of different approaches in social scientific studies of online support groups. Considering social work practitioners, the most relevant gaps are the neglected viewpoints of professionals, and the issue of interaction between the client and the professional. Most studies concern the effects of support groups on the individual, and the interaction which takes place between clients. However, some recent studies (such as Owen et al. 2009; Gilat et al. 2011; 2012) consider the issue of professional involvement in social support groups.

We found that studies on online support groups rarely consider Doise's ideological level, and studies that frame online support groups as a socio-political issue are in the minority. Although such studies could exist outside our review, this lack of available analysis is a concern for social work practitioners. The lack of research on online support as a part of organizational and political processes affects the development of these services, and thereby affects the whole profession.

The framework appeared to function well in showing how the current knowledge on online support groups is divided across scholarly approaches. We expected that including the term "group" would return more studies that approach the topic on a group level, looking at the interaction which takes place between individuals. Instead, it appeared that including the concept of a "group" does not exclude the possibility of approaching the topic on an individual level – for example, by studying the effects of the group on the individual. We therefore consider our analysis as illustrative of the current landscape of social scientific research on online support groups, showing which perspectives receive most attention and which are less studied. We expect this mapping to be relevant in guiding the design of future studies to inform social work practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The review captures what is going on in the field of social scientific research on online support groups. The research seems to focus on examining the participant (or client) experiences and the interaction between participants. However, this narrow research base may have a negative effect on the development of online group work for social work practice, in that it is difficult to start the development and promotion of a practice when the scientific knowledge of its mechanisms, or pros and cons is scarce.

Only a few of the reviewed articles researched groups which were supervised by professionals. This could indicate that there are few professionally supervised online support groups in the field of social and therapy work to examine. Nevertheless, social work practice is in a process of change, and this merits exploring the potential of online environments. Group action and interaction is characteristic for these environments, and utilizing existing, well-functioning online groups could be one way of starting to blend online and offline practices (e.g. Jones & Meier 2011). According to the reviewed research, professionally supervised online support groups have some considerable advantages compared to groups consisting only of peers. On the positional level between professionals and clients, current research focuses on the benefits that having a moderator might provide for the group, including issues of increased participation (Klemm 2012), less frequent suicide threats (Gilat & Sharar 2007), and various psychological benefits (Lepore et al. 2011). The benefits of the group having a professional supervisor are important to acknowledge when developing social work practices, and would benefit from further research. Also, some studies such as Owen

et al. (2009), Gilat et al. (2011) and Gilat et al. (2012) acknowledged the problems that online interaction may impose on facilitating support groups, and pinpointed strategies that professionals may use to overcome them. For example a lack of non-verbal and visual cues, or technical and literacy challenges can make online practices difficult. Meeting face to face is considered to be very important for forming a confident relationship between the social worker and the client (Broadhurst & Mason 2014), yet there is also research that argues that the client-professional relationship can be as adequate in online as in face-to-face therapeutic practice (e.g. Holmes & Foster 2012; Kiluk et al. 2014; LaMendola 2010).

Although we found only a few studies focused on an organizational/societal level, these studies seem to acknowledge the shift in how expertise is understood in professional practices. In online support groups clients can question and discuss professional practices, and by sharing their experiences and knowledge, they can support, learn from and empower each other. Involving clients in research and the development of new social work practices is a current trend (e.g. Beresford & Boxall 2012; Loughran & McCann 2013; Tew, Holley & Caplen 2012). Participatory methodology promotes inclusion, which is essential when working with vulnerable groups of people with varying ICT skills (Isomäki & Kuronen 2013). Therefore the development of online social work practices would benefit from practice or action oriented research, combining professional and service user experiences and expertise, and having clients and social workers planning and carrying through the research and development projects together.

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