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"I'm not the same person now": The psychological implications of online contact risk experiences for adults with intellectual disabilities

Introduction

Digital inclusion is encased within the wider issue of social inclusion, where a reciprocal relationship exists in which existing social inequalities not only act as a barrier to digital inclusion, but digital inclusion in itself can widen existing social inequalities (DiMaggio and Garip, 2012; Robinson et al., 2015). Populations that are vulnerable to such inequalities include those with disabilities (Tsatsou, 2022a). Yet not all people with disabilities are comparably disadvantaged (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2006). It has been found that people with intellectual disabilities are a significant subtype within the disabled population who have less access to digital devices than those without intellectual disabilities (Chadwick et al., 2013; Agren et al., 2019). One reason for this disparity is gatekeeping due to fear of online negative comments, messages and contact (Chadwick, 2019; Seale & Chadwick, 2017). Yet, the experiences of online negative comments and/or messages, found within cyberbullying and other online contact risks, have been seldom studied. To address this gap, the current study applies qualitative in-depth approaches to consider the emotional and psychological implications of this type of online contact for people with intellectual disabilities.

Literature Review

Digital Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities

There are several barriers towards digital inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities. Chadwick et al. (2013) identified barriers including individual impairment-associated

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challenges, alongside factors linked to support, education and training; governmental policy and support; financial and economical considerations; and societal attitudes and exclusion. Lussier-Desrochers et al. (2017) also referenced impairment-related challenges as a barrier in terms of those with intellectual disabilities lacking the required sensorimotor, cognitive and technical abilities for digital use, alongside lack of access to devices, the internet, and the knowledge of internet social norms and rules.

There is a body of evidence now that COVID-19 provided the catalyst to enhance the digital inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities; however, the relationship is complex, as this change appears to be more evident in those who had previously used technology (Caton et al., 2022; Chadwick et al., 2022). For example, Caton et al. (2022) found that 89.8% of 571 individuals with intellectual disabilities interviewed had internet access at home, with 88.9% utilising it daily. However, white participants were over-represented in this study hence the complex dynamics of digital inclusion in terms of intersectionality are not fully considered (Tsatsou, 2022b). In line with this, Chadwick et al. (2022) concluded that although the pandemic raised awareness around digital poverty for people with intellectual disabilities, it appears it has widened rather than reduced the digital divide gap for some, due to factors including the cost of digital devices and a lack of internet connection, which may indicate intersectionality in terms of lower socioeconomic status within subpopulations of the intellectual disabilities populations.

The Barrier of Protection From Harm Over Online Benefits

People with intellectual disabilities can experience a large number of online benefits, including: developing their social identity and self-esteem (Caton and Chapman, 2016); self-advocacy

and the development of new friendships (e.g., see Chadwick et al., 2013); reducing disability stigma (Tsatsou, 2021); and facilitating the development of valued social roles and feelings of pleasure, capability and self-worth (Chadwick and Fullwood, 2018). However, protection from harm is often prioritised above such benefits Underpinning this lie two overarching beliefs: (1) the internet is not safe and (2) people with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to online risk (Chadwick et al., 2017, 2022). This results in gate-keeping and restrictive mediation strategies by caregivers (Seale and Chadwick, 2017). People with intellectual disabilities must be given the dignity of being exposed to risk like everybody else (Perske, 1974), as offered by a positive risk-taking approach defined by shared decision-making, creativity and resilience (Seale, 2014; Seale et al., 2013; Seale and Chadwick, 2017). However, it is important to explore such risks to ensure effective decision-making can be made by all parties. Previous theories of victimisation and online risk may allow for a greater understanding of potential risks.

Theories Of Victimisation

Although initially developed to explain offline victimisation, Routine Activity Theory (RAT) (Cohen and Felson, 1979) and Lifestyle-exposure Theory (LET) (Hindelang et al., 1978) are often used to explain cybervictimisation. According to both theories, routine activities and lifestyles in our social environment can be used to make sense of the behaviours that result in victimisation, where "dangerous" digital use in the form of excessive time spent in digital environments can result in a greater risk of cybervictimisation (Marttila et al., 2021). Within RAT there needs to be a vulnerable target, access to the target for a motivated offender and an absence of skilled guardianship (Cohen and Felson, 1979). This may have important

implications for adults with intellectual disabilities, who according to RAT may be at a greater risk of cybervictimisation due to their status as a vulnerable group.

Types Of Online Risk

The EU Kids Online framework (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; Livingstone and Stoilova, 2021) defines four types of online risk: (1) online content –the individual is the recipient of mass-distributed content e.g., pornographic content, (2) online contact – the individual is the participant in an interactive situation e.g., being cybervictimised through cyberbullying, (3) online conduct – the individual is an actor e.g., perpetrating cyberbullying and (4) online contract – the individual accepts terms and conditions, which allows for security or privacy risks e.g. you are found on a digital database which holds your profile and are subject to identity theft or fraud. This framework has been consistently applied in online risk research with people with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Chadwick et al., 2017; Chiner et al., 2021; Gómez-Puerta & Chiner, 2021). However, though useful, this framework was developed from studies with young people without intellectual disabilities, hence application of this framework should be done with caution (Seale and Chadwick, 2017). Nonetheless, it has been applied to adults with intellectual disabilities previously and provides a framework for considering different risk types (Chadwick, 2022).

In terms of the empirical literature on online risks for people with intellectual disabilities, the literature is still relatively scarce (Chadwick, 2019). Online contact risks are the most discussed risk type by people with intellectual disabilities (Chadwick, 2022). Specifically, cyberbullying victimisation, defined as being a victim of actions via ICTs intended to cause harm (Bauman, 2014) is the main risk that has been empirically investigated throughout the intellectual

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disabilities and online risk literature usually adopting a quantitative approach (e.g., Chiner et al., 2017; Didden et al., 2009; Wright, 2017; Wright and Wachs, 2020) neglecting the lived experiences of online risk which can be explored effectively using qualitative approaches.

The Psychological Implications

It is important to consider the psychological implications of online contact risks. One key psychological consideration is the emotional responses to online negative contacts and experiences which have seldom been considered in people with intellectual disabilities. The emotion annotation and representation language (EARL) proposed by the Human-Machine Interaction Network on Emotion (HUMAINE Association, 2006) is one of the most comprehensive classifications of emotions in the literature to date. It includes 48 emotions and defines emotions as being positive or negative but also considers the cognitive processing of the emotions in the emotional categories. This categorisation, utilised in this study, provides a standard framework to reference in terms of how victimisation may trigger differing emotions as an indicator of psychological impact and also allows for the range of emotions experienced to be considered.

The Present Study

Despite recommendations (Seale and Chadwick, 2017) the literature has not yet used a qualitative approach such as interviewing to specifically explore in-depth the psychological implications of online risks including cyberbullying victimisation experiences for adults with intellectual disabilities, including the possible wide range of emotional responses. This will be addressed using semi-structured interviews and the following research question:

What are the psychological implications of experiences of online contact risks, including online

negative comments and/or messages for adults with intellectual disabilities?

Method

Study Design

This qualitative phenomenological, exploratory study adopted a postpositivist critical realist paradigm. (Erickson, 2018; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Ethical approval for the study was given by the University [Removed for Review].

Participants

A purposive sample of 15 participants were interviewed. The inclusion criteria for participants were: (a) adults, aged 18+, (b) self-identifying as having an intellectual disability, (c) having current or previous experience of using the internet, (d) understanding both written (easy-read) and spoken English, (e) living in the UK and (f) having the mental capacity to provide informed consent to participate.

The sample comprised 7 females and 8 males, age ranged between 26 and 76 years (*M*=41.6, *SD*=15.32). Ethnicity of the participants included White British (60%), Black British (33.3%) and Pakistani British (6.7%). Most participants self-identified as having a mild-moderate intellectual disability (73.3%), and the remaining participants identified as having a moderate intellectual disability (26.7%). Two participants were autistic and one had dyslexia alongside

their intellectual disability. Participants lived independently (53.3%), with family (26.7%) or in a care home (20%). Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Smartphones were the most common device utilised by the participants (80%), followed by iPads (40%), other tablets (26.7%), laptops (26.7%) and desktops (13.3%). Most participants used the internet daily (73.3%), with half of these having usage of four hours or more (45.5%), slightly fewer (36.4%) used the internet for one to four hours, and fewer still used the internet for less than an hour (18.2%).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via self-advocacy organisations throughout England. Interested individuals were sent the easy-to-read study information prior to any interview. All 15 participants completed the consent form via the web-based survey platform, Qualtrics XM, which also had an audio-description of the consent form.

Interviews

The background demographic questions and semi-structured interview schedule comprising 22 questions explored phenomenological experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities of online contact risks, including online negative comments and/or messages (see supplementary material for interview schedule). The wording of the questions was informed by guidance on interviewing people with intellectual disabilities (Finlay and Lyons, 2002; Perry, 2004; Prosser and Bromley, 2012). Questions were created with single-clause sentences, short words and sentences, active verbs, and the present tense (where suitable); double negatives, jargon, colloquialisms, figurative language, and abstract concepts were not used (Prosser and Bromley,

2012). Suggested prompts including "Can you tell me more about that" and "Can you explain what you mean by…?'" (Prosser and Bromley, 2012: 111) to check meaning and reduce the chance of acquiescence (Finlay and Lyons, 2002). Interview lengths ranged from 16 to 115 minutes (*M*=49, *SD*= 26.65).

All interviews were conducted by the first author remotely using the participant's preferred medium. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2021. The first participant acted as a pilot for the study, but data was incorporated into the main analysis as it was of sufficient quality. During this process, the staff member who had assisted in the recruitment gave feedback on the pilot questions and provided additional photo symbols to support understanding. These were incorporated into the final interview. Examples of incorporations include the word "access" was changed to the simpler phrase "how would you use," and thumbs up and thumbs down symbols were added.

Most participants (80%) requested a video interview, and the remainder requested a telephone interview (20%). Although the researcher initially planned for individual interviews which was the format for the majority of interviews (66.7%), participants from one advocacy organisation requested a group interview format (33.3%). The group interview followed the same interview procedure as the individual interviews rather than a separate focus group procedure.
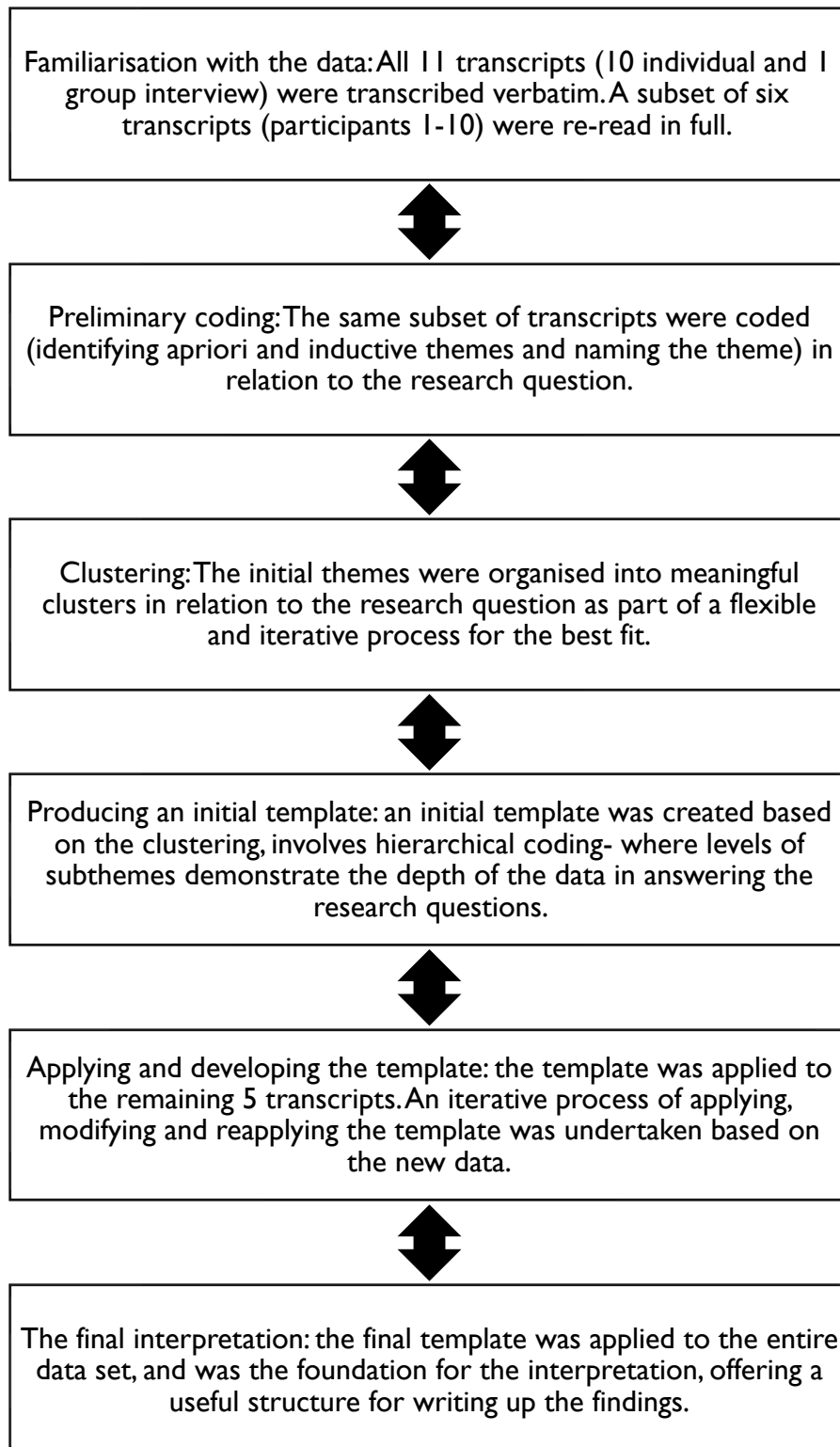
Data Analysis

Template analysis, a form of thematic analysis, was used due to its strength in mixing both structure and flexibility, its depth and detail in coding where four or more levels of themes are often standard, and the inclusion of both deductive and inductive themes (Brooks et al., 2015;

Brooks and King, 2012; King and Brooks, 2017). Deductive themes were identified through the researcher's prior engagement with the classification of emotions, EARL (HUMAINE Association, 2006). EARL was utilised due to its comprehensiveness over other emotion classification frameworks, categorising negative emotions into negative and forceful, negative and not in control and negative and passive emotions. Analysis followed the template analysis steps (King and Brooks, 2017) (Figure 1) and utilised NVivo 1.6.1 analysis software.

Trustworthiness of the findings, in line with Shenton (2004), was demonstrated in several ways including quality checking in the form of independent coding and theme verification by the second and third author; divergences were discussed until all authors agreed and each theme was supported by thick descriptions in the form of participant quotations.

Figure 1.

Template Analysis Steps

Familiarisation with the data: All 11 transcripts (10 individual and 1 group interview) were transcribed verbatim. A subset of six transcripts (participants 1-10) were re-read in full.

Preliminary coding: The same subset of transcripts were coded (identifying apriori and inductive themes and naming the theme) in relation to the research question.

Clustering: The initial themes were organised into meaningful clusters in relation to the research question as part of a flexible and iterative process for the best fit.

Producing an initial template: an initial template was created based on the clustering, involves hierarchical coding- where levels of subthemes demonstrate the depth of the data in answering the research questions.

Applying and developing the template: the template was applied to the remaining 5 transcripts. An iterative process of applying, modifying and reapplying the template was undertaken based on the new data.

The final interpretation: the final template was applied to the entire data set, and was the foundation for the interpretation, offering a useful structure for writing up the findings.

Findings

Though this study at its inception, aimed to address gaps solely within online contact risks, other risks, including online contract, content and conduct risks, also arose in the participants' recounted experiences. The findings relate to the psychological implications of all these risks where relevant. All participants appeared to have knowledge and awareness, to varying degrees, of various online risks, based on either their own direct experiences of online risks (nearly half of the participants) or through the experiences of others. The risks experienced by most participants were online contact risks in the form of cyberbullying which included the receipt of negative online comments and messages, and image-based sexual abuse. Three main themes were presented in the final template in relation to the psychological implications of online risks.

Theme One: Experiencing Negative Emotions in Relation to Online Risks

This theme, utilising the EARL classification of emotions, captures the consensus across the interviews that online risk experiences were linked to negative emotions, after the event, based on the participants' direct, perceived or imagined experiences. A wide range of descriptive emotion words were used by the participants to detail how they felt, feel or would feel in response to online risks. This included three subthemes detailing types of emotional responses. Participants reported experiencing multiple types of emotions concurrently with the descriptive emotions reported by participants overlapped conceptually (e.g., feeling mad and angry).

Negative Passive Emotions

Many of the participants reported feeling upset as a negative passive emotion following an experience of online risk. For example, Miles described feeling upset following his experience of having his Facebook hacked via a phishing scam:

> *Interviewer: "How did that make you feel when that happened?"*
>
> *Miles: "A little upset, but I tried to move on and try not to worry about it because it all just made me ill."*

Similarly, Kylie reported that she and her family felt "sad", as well as the forceful emotion of feeling "mad", following their online risk experience of socially unacceptable messages:

> *Kylie: "It made us feel sad…We was all quite mad about it."*

Shani also explained that he experienced sadness in response to receiving messages, expressing strong emotion in the form of anger, which may reflect his views around anger more broadly;

> *Interviewer: "How did it make you feel when you-you first got the messages from them?"*
>
> *Shani: "Angry and upset."*

Shani also noted that he felt transferred sadness in response to seeing hateful content, such as comments about weight towards a YouTube content maker. He felt the perpetrator did not understand the perspective of the person who the comments were about and instead, the hateful content reflected wider societal stigma around weight. Shani is expressing his empathy and

identification with the victim in terms of understanding how the victim may have had a difficult time, and was coping through "eating":

> Shani: "it does make me feel, sad though 'because…it's not good to talk about other people's weight though…They might've been through-through some stuff really"

Sabeeha explained how she experienced "hurt" as a passive emotion in response to "nasty" or "unpleasant" WhatsApp messages:

> Sabeeha: "If I receive that nasty unpleasant message on WhatsApp… It makes me—I-I feel hurt."

Negative Forceful Emotions

The participants also described experiencing forceful emotions following their experience of online risk. Maha said that when she experienced aggressive messages, she felt extremely angry to the degree that it exacerbated her existing anger problems. She gave the specific example that she wanted to "punch" a person in the "face" when she experienced insulting messages about her appearance:

> Maha: "But, I just get mean, aggressive comments…It makes me very angry - and I have anger issues. So, I don't want to make my anger even more worse… Like I want to punch someone's face…That's how I felt…like I had said, yes, I have. Again, it's not acceptable…Because it's being nasty, unpleasant, it's really - just makes you feel like you have more anger coming out of you."

Several participants also detailed experiencing forceful emotions in the form of being annoyed. For example, Sam described feeling annoyed about how people he does not know find him on Facebook when he believed Facebook was just for "family and friends":

Sam: "I thought with Facebook friends, just family and friends…Not got strangers who don't really -don't know you…I don't like that - I don't like that. People I don't know and they got my name from people I don't know, it do annoy me."

Whereas Kylie detailed that in response to socially unacceptable comments on a social media post, she and her family also felt annoyance:

Kylie: "So that quite annoyed us, basically. You just wouldn't say things like that."

Simon also felt annoyed when he was exposed to hateful comments about YouTubers' "weight" and "appearance":

Simon: "It made me feel annoyed for people saying that about someone."

Sam also reflected a couple of times on his disgust as a forceful emotion; for example, he felt disgusted in response to unwanted requests to send sexual images of himself and romance scams on Facebook, which prevented him from using the platform:

> Sam: "Cause I feel - I feel it's disgusting because sometimes I-can't use anything on Facebook."

Negative Emotions Linked to Feeling Out of Control

Sam described how, following his experience of a cluster of online risks from the same perpetrator whom he initially connected with on Facebook, he felt "very wary" about using and making new friends on the platform again:

> Sam: "I were very wary…To go on Facebook and to make friends again."

Other negative emotions linked to feeling out of control were reported by Maha when she felt both "scared" and "terrified" in the context of the sextortion that her personal sexual images would be posted online if she did not send more sexual images of herself:

> Maha: "I'm scared that people - that those guys might like, post things on internet and - YouTube and that's what I was scared of…I got really terrified."

Similarly, Sam was also "scared" in relation to his experiences of image-based sexual abuse when being harassed for sexual images of himself as well as money in attempts at romances scams:

> "How did you feel, Sam, when you used to get a lot of these messages from people? Sam: Scared."

Sabeeha also disclosed that if she were exposed to online hateful content in the form of rude comments, she would feel "stressed" as a negative emotion related to feeling out of control:

> Interviewer: *"How does it make-make you feel when you see comments like that online?"*
>
> Sabeeha: *"Well, if I see a comment online, it might make me feel stressed."*

Theme Two: Attribution of Blame for the Online Risk Experiences

This theme denotes how the participants attributed blame for their direct experiences of online risks. The impression across the participants' experiences was that when the experienced risk did not contain a sexual element, the participants tended to attribute blame to the perpetrator of the risk. However, when the experienced risk had a sexual component, such as found in the experiences of image-based sexual abuse, the participants blamed themselves, engaging in internalised victim-blaming.

Blaming the Perpetrator for the Online Risk Experience

This subtheme captured the diversity of ways in which participants blamed the perpetrator for the online risk experience. This included explaining the perpetrator's actions based on facets of their personality, emotional state, and beliefs and/or knowledge. In relation to explaining the actions of the perpetrator through their personality, Sela explained that people receive rude messages online because the perpetrator was "cruel":

> Interviewer: *"do we have an idea why people might be-be rude online?*
>
> Sela: *"Because they're cruel."*

For Miles, concerning his experience of having his Facebook hacked via a phishing link, he blamed the perpetrator through acknowledging it was not his own fault:

> *Miles: We set up another Facebook account for myself and just learned to move on and it weren't my fault…I got a newer one."*

When Miles was being bullied in the form of name-calling regarding his autism, he also described the perpetrator's actions by their disposition (e.g., "silly" and "stupid"). Miles also referred to the perpetrator's emotional state as a reason, describing their boredom. He went on to blame the perpetrator's knowledge, claiming that they did not know enough about autism:

> *Miles: "I thought 'There are silly people in the world and that might be one of them idiots, unfortunately'…there is some people that are stupid…I just think they've got nothing better to do, unfortunately…I think because it- there's not a good understanding about autism still…but we're getting there."*

Sam also referred to the knowledge and beliefs of the perpetrator in his explanation for the behaviour, saying that they believe they can put "nasty" and "rude" messages on social media because there will be no negative consequences to their actions. Sam also provided an insight into the psychology of reputation, arguing the perpetrators also did this because it made them look "big":

> *Sam: "They feel that- they feel they can get away with it….They feel it makes them look big."*

Internalised Victim-Blaming in Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Online risks with an image-based sexual abuse component (as part of romance scams and extortion as online contract risks), resulted in all the participants blaming themselves (termed internalised victim-blaming). Participants believed that it was their fault because they were lonely, they could not trust themselves online to make decisions or that it happened due to their personal characteristics. For example, Sam outlined that he believed he was to blame for the cyber-flashing, as well as the messages threatening to send sexual images to his family in the context of both a romance scam and extortion. He identified his loneliness as a risk factor for accepting unwanted online interactions when speaking to people he did not know online due to feeling "lonely" and wanting to alleviate this through the universal human need to connect, despite not necessarily liking the nature of the contact:

> Sam: *"It was bit of my fault cause I was lonely…I'll be honest, it was a little my-my fault cause I was lonely….And I just wanted to make friends…I would be for quite a lonely time."*

Maha, in the context of her image-based sexual abuse and subsequent sextortion, blamed herself, contending she could not be trusted to make decisions on the internet, specifically, sexual decisions. She believed that sending the sexual images of herself, which may or may have not been motivated by a universal human need for sexual contact, was "stupid":

> Maha: *"Which is, I don't trust myself that much."*
> Interviewer: *"Okay, so kind of not trusting yourself with-with decisions."*
> Maha: *"Mm."*

> *Interviewer: "Okay, and is that based on maybe the decisions you think have been*
>
> *bad?"*
>
> *Maha: "Yeah."*
>
> *Interviewer: "Okay. Would you mind, um, giving me just an example?"*
>
> *Maha: "Um, sexual."*

Moreover, in relation to cyber-flashing, Maha shared that she believes this happens because of her personal characteristics, her gender, and it is for this reason she dislikes being "a woman":

> *Maha: "That's the things. I don't like being a woman because-rude things happens."*

Theme Three: Experiencing Personal Growth Following Online Risk Experiences

For a subsection of those who had experiences of online risk, not only was there a negative emotional impact in the short term but there was positive growth, akin to post-traumatic growth, in the longer term. The participants spoke about how this growth included increased confidence and learning from the experience. For example, Maha explained that due to her experiences of online risk, she had noticed a change in herself as a person in the form of improved confidence, something which allowed her to protect herself more effectively online because she was no longer scared. She now questioned why she should feel insecure like she had done previously:

> *Maha: "I have no idea but I think I'm getting more confidence, I guess… If I get more*
>
> *confidence in myself, then I don't need to- well, if I do get nasty comments-I'll just give*
>
> *them nasty comments back…Because I'm - now I'm not afraid of - being insecure…I've*

been insecure a long time now, so-why should I be insecure more?...I think it's all this

experience I had...I feel like I've changed (as a) person."

Similarly, Sam spoke about his increased confidence following his experiences of online risk, as well as how he was also a changed person, and that he had learned from these experiences:

Sam: *"And it build your confidence...It did for me...But now cause- now I'm not the*

same person now... But I learned from that, I learned from that."

This growth had also allowed Sam to advise others on Twitter and Facebook. He had based this on his lived experience, advising others to talk to someone when "isolated" rather than keeping it to themselves, which could negatively impact their psychological health.

Likewise, Miles described his positive growth in the form of learning how to recognise and avoid phishing scams based on his experience of having his Facebook account hacked:

Miles: *"But, I learned from it...I've learned to not click owt if it don't look genuine, so*

I've learned from it."

Discussion

All participants in the current study appeared to have knowledge and awareness around different online risks, and for nearly half of the participants this was based on their own personal experiences of cybervictimisation, including cyberbullying in the form of receiving negative online comments and messages, and image-based sexual abuse. This is similar to the findings from Holmes and O'Loughlin (2014) who found that adults with intellectual

disabilities had online contact risk experiences in the form of cyberbullying and image-based sexual abuse through receiving unwanted sexual messages and requests to send sexual images of themselves on the internet. The current findings, therefore, add to limited research on experiences of online risks for adults with intellectual disabilities (Chadwick, 2019) and research exploring the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, participants in the current study reported some form of psychological implications following direct and perceived experiences of online risks. This allows for greater awareness and understanding of online risks which can contribute to a positive risk-taking approach towards online risks (Seale and Chadwick, 2017).

Experiencing Negative Emotions Following Online Risk

Participants all linked online risk experiences to subsequently experiencing negative emotions, based on both their direct experiences of online risks and perceived or imagined online risks. One important finding from the current study was the range of different types of negative emotions that the participants reported. Three broad categories of emotions, in line with EARL, were reported: passive emotions, forceful emotions and experiencing emotions linked to feeling not in control, which appeared to be short-lived following the negative event.

Emotions identified in the current study have not previously been identified in the intellectual disabilities and online risk literature. However, many of the emotional responses identified here, such as passive emotions, including sadness; forceful emotions, such as anger, and emotions linked to feeling not in control, including fear and embarrassment have been reported in cybervictimisation literature for individuals without disabilities (Beran and Li, 2005; Ortega et al., 2009; Price and Dalgleish, 2010). This indicates that people with intellectual disabilities have much in common with the neurotypical majority without intellectual disabilities; though

some of the emotions identified have not been reported previously, including feeling terrified and horrified. The majority of negative emotions experienced by participants were internalised rather than externalised emotions. This mirrors the findings by Wright (2016) based on interviews with 76 adolescents without intellectual and developmental disabilities, where the majority of emotions experienced by the participants were internalised. It is possible that internalised emotions are viewed as less active and, therefore, developed earlier, which may be linked to people with intellectual disabilities not being afforded adult category status and often considered 'eternal children' (Johnson et al., 2010). In other words, people with intellectual disabilities may have learned but not felt able to express themselves through more externalised emotions due to their status in society and frequently reduced autonomy.

Experiencing Personal Growth Following Online Risk

While all the participants who had direct online risk experiences reported negative emotions following the event, in some cases, they also experienced growth, akin to what is termed post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018). Both personal growth, which included improved confidence, and learning from the online risk experience, which later allowed them to use their experiences to support others were evident. This is a novel finding, as while people with intellectual disabilities experience post-traumatic growth, as well as resilience and recovery (Scheffers et al., 2020), there are no studies examining growth in the context of online victimisation for adults with intellectual disabilities, except for Chadwick (2022) where adults with intellectual disabilities reported resilience following online risk. This has important implications for the digital divide in terms of challenging barriers to digital inclusion in the form of a focus on protection from harm for people with intellectual disabilities, as it shows how risk exposure can result in positive growth.

Attribution of Blame for the Online Risk Experience

Regarding attribution of blame, the current study found that the participants made different attributions for the experiences, and this appeared to be a function of the type of risk involved. Literature to date has tended not to examine individuals' attributions for actual experiences of cybervictimisation. In relation to non-sexual-based cybercrimes, such as cyberbullying, the participants tended to blame the perpetrator; attributing the experience to the personality, beliefs and/or knowledge, and emotions of the perpetrator. In contrast, in instances of image-based sexual abuse (i.e., cyber-flashing and receiving unwanted requests to send sexual images of themselves), participants tended to blame themselves, believing that it was their fault due to feeling lonely, their inability to trust themselves with decisions, or their personal characteristics, such as their gender. The participants' own understandings of why they were victimised challenge part of the assumptions of RAT and LET theories (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Hindelang et al., 1978), as participants did not allude to their being in regularly used digital environments within their experiences of victimisation. However, the participants did delve deeper into specific motivations that a perpetrator might hold and vulnerabilities that might have made them a suitable target in line with RAT.

The self-blame attribution has also been found in both face-to-face and cyber-related aggression/bullying among participants without disabilities. For example, Wright (2016) found self-blame attributions from cyberbullying being a result of the victim's 'bad' characteristics, (e.g., being different), whereas, in the current study, the participants attributed blame to themselves due to their personal characteristics, including their loneliness and gender. People with intellectual disabilities are at a greater risk of loneliness and limited social connectedness (Clements et al., 2020), which can be due to existing societal inequalities resulting from lower

social mobility (Emerson and Gone, 2012). In relation to gender, this may link to the previously mentioned intersectionality of digital inclusion (Tsatsou, 2022b), where being part of a particular gender group and having an intellectual disability may result in a greater risk of lower digital inclusion. Interestingly, the participants in the current study did not mention their other intersected vulnerabilities such as having a disability, their global majority status, or older age as being linked to victimisation.

In the current study, self-blame only occurred in image-based sexual abuse. Receiving unwanted sexual images, otherwise known as 'cyber-flashing' has seldom been considered for adults with intellectual disabilities. Holmes and O'Loughlin (2014) and Chadwick (2022) both report on women with mild intellectual disabilities, receiving inappropriate images from males who they connected with on Facebook. Little attention has also been given to sextortion for adults with intellectual disabilities. Instead, most studies have focused on children and adolescents where the behaviour is termed sexual 'solicitation' (Normand and Sallafranque St-Louis, 2016). The current study adds to the minimal existing literature by corroborating that image-based sexual abuse does occur for adults with intellectual disabilities.

Self-blame only occurring in the context of online image-based sexual abuse alongside blackmailing/extortion may be a consequence of the internalisation of the societal stigma and shame which is more common in this type of online victimisation (Felson et al., 2002; Ullman, 1996). A similar process may happen in online sexual victimisation and may be exacerbated for people with intellectual disabilities as they already face significant societal stigmatisation Emerson and Hatton, 2014).

Strengths And Limitations

A strength of the current research is the inclusion of the voices of adults with intellectual disabilities. Despite wishing to partake in research, this population have experienced a history of exclusion (McDonald et al., 2013). An additional strength of remote interviewing was the contextual naturalness, whereby undertaking online interviews about online experiences can support participants to answer questions as the interviews took place in the same setting as the area of interest (Mann and Stewart, 2001).

A limitation of the current study is the 'double empathy' problem. When two people with very different experiences interact, they may struggle to empathise with each other (Macmillan et al., 2022). As two participants had an autism diagnosis, this may have negatively impacted mutual understanding during the interview process. To overcome this the lead author checked for acquiescence. This allowed for consideration of the power dynamics within the interview. Authors aimed to bracket previous knowledge, biases, attitudes, beliefs and experiences linked to people with intellectual disabilities to better understand, the voices and experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities, and deductive themes in the analysis have been detailed.

As this study used purposeful sampling whereby all the participants were recruited through self-advocacy agencies throughout England, the participants are possibly more accustomed to having greater self-empowerment, resilience and independence due to their self-advocate status and experiences (Clarke et al., 2015). Therefore, the theme around personal growth may not reflect adults with intellectual disabilities who are not self-advocates.

Recommendations for Practice

The current findings reveal that adults with intellectual disabilities have negative online experiences, which, resulted in a wide range of negative emotions. Therefore, it is fundamental that professionals supporting an individual with intellectual disabilities adopt a non-judgemental attitude (Cooper, 2009) to reduce barriers to digital inclusion. This may be especially true of individuals who have experienced image-based sexual abuse and may be more prone to internalised victim-blaming. In addition, this attitude may support growth akin to post-traumatic growth as experienced by some participants. Not judging emotions has been shown to predict greater cognitive processing linked to post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

Recommendations for Research

Empirical research needs to continue understanding the emotional impact of online risk experiences from the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities through qualitative research designs. Studies should explore if internalised emotions are more frequently reported following an online risk experience over externalised emotions.

In general, skill development, resilience and post-traumatic growth literature needs to be developed for people with intellectual disabilities (Chadwick, 2019). This should be in line with a 'both/and' perspective (Cooper and McLeod, 2012), which considers both the negative and positive impacts of online risk experiences. It is important to ascertain if recovery, resilience, and post-traumatic growth are present in the experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities who are not members of a self-advocacy group, and/or have more moderate, severe and profound intellectual disabilities. This can inform and assist in the development of interventions aimed at building and fostering such post-traumatic growth in those who have had negative online experiences as part of promoting continued digital inclusion in a post-

pandemic world. Taking a risk-averse approach may not be in the best interests of people with intellectual disabilities. Further research should explore how to provide sensitive, warm and facilitatory support around online risk to people with intellectual disabilities.

Research needs to be undertaken to understand the attribution of blame process in online risk experiences for people with intellectual disabilities. For example, further investigation of possible associations between internalised victim-blaming and specific online risks including image-based sexual abuse, romance scams and blackmailing/extortion could build on the findings here. In addition, research should continue to consider the intersectionality of vulnerability to digital inequalities (Tsatsou, 2022b), specifically, in relation to experiences of online victimisation and group membership in terms of disability status, ethnic minority status, and older age and possible implications for the attribution of blame process. The process of internalised victim-blaming may exacerbate negative impacts and may prevent people from seeking and accessing support. Therefore, conducting research to better understand this will inform interventions to promote access to social support as part of facilitating digital inclusion.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that there are both negative and positive psychological implications experienced by adults with intellectual disabilities in response to online risks. In particular, both negative emotions and also positive growth may be experienced. Furthermore, the attribution of blame process in cybervictimisation can involve both blaming the perpetrator but also internalised self-blaming depending on the type of online risk. It is important to foster growth in supporting the ability of adults with intellectual disabilities to manage online risk experiences.

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