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From Likes to Lifeworlds: The Contributions of Youth Work Practice in the Online Lifeworld to Young People's Development

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Abstract

As youth workers increasingly offer support and guidance within digital environments, the question arises as to what impact this support has on the (online) lives of young people. This paper explores the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld on young peoples' development, building on previous studies concerning youth work outcomes and the developmental needs of young people. A qualitative research design was employed, including digital diaries of youth workers and semi-structured interviews with both young people ($N = 37$) and youth workers ($N = 25$). The findings highlight the role of youth work in helping young people navigate social media; develop new skills, talents, and social connections; and increase awareness of online risks. Youth workers also support young people in coping with negative online experiences, including loneliness and mental health challenges. The contribution of online youth work is less visible in certain aspects of developmental needs, namely online safety and privacy, self-image, and assessing online information. This paper concludes by emphasising the need for further research into the long-term impact of youth work in the online lifeworld, particularly in light of rapid technological developments, the growing influence of artificial intelligence, and the increasing involvement of youth in digital forms of crime. The findings described in this study can form a base for future research to better understand the impact of these emerging issues on youth development and youth work practice, as well as to develop appropriate interventions.

Keywords: online youth work; online lifeworld; young people; outcomes of youth work; contribution to development



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1. Introduction

In today's digital age, young people's online environments have become an integral part of their daily lives. The online lifeworld offers many opportunities for young people's personal and social development. Not all young people can successfully use these opportunities: some of them need support in meeting their developmental needs in this part of their lifeworld. In various digital spaces, professional youth workers try to reach out to them, to identify their ambitions and problems, to assess their needs, and to provide them with appropriate support (Todorovic et al. 2023). This support to young people includes offering instrumental, informational, socio-emotional, and cognitive support (Digital Youth Work n.d.; Schlummer 2018; Todorovic et al. 2024). However, the contribution of this support in the online lifeworld to improve young people's lives, both online and offline, remains

unclear. Hence, we explore the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld, with a focus on how the developmental needs of (vulnerable) young people are met. Our main objective is to explore how youth work in the online lifeworld contributes to meet the developmental needs of young people. We ask the following research question: what is the contribution of youth work in the online lifeworld to the development of (vulnerable) young people? We examine this issue from the perspective and experiences of Dutch young people and professional youth workers in online youth work practice. The focus on the perspectives and experiences of young people and youth workers offers valuable empirical data that can serve to improve youth work practice and youth policy on online support and can build a foundation for future research. In this way, we claim to enrich the limited body of knowledge on this topic.

The underlying rationale, objectives, methodological approaches, forms of practice, and even the age range of participants differ across countries (Cooper 2018). In that regard, the Netherlands possesses a distinct infrastructure and policy framework for youth work, which may differ from those of other countries and contexts both within and beyond the Western world. Consequently, the findings may not be readily generalisable to settings where youth work practices or institutional arrangements differ. Nevertheless, as a welfare state and a member of the European Union, the Netherlands aligns with the European Youth Work Agenda (European Commission 2017), which explicitly includes online youth work as an area of focus. This study therefore offers insights that may hold broader relevance beyond the Dutch context.

Contribution of Offline and Online Youth Work Practice to Young People's Development

Professional youth work aims to support young people (10–24 years old) transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Dunne et al. 2014; Metz 2011). In the resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field, a broad definition indicates how youth work practice contributes to achieve its aims by using various methods for different areas of young people's development and for diverse target groups:

Youth work is a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature both by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities also include sport and services for young people. Youth work belongs to the area of 'out-of-school' education, as well as specific leisure time activities managed by professional or voluntary youth workers and youth leaders, and is based on non-formal learning processes and on voluntary participation.. (The Council of the European Union 2009, p. 4)

Professional youth work practice in the Netherlands is in line with this definition. The starting point is the lifeworld of young people. Professional youth workers try to connect with young people; they engage in their lives, providing them spaces and opportunities to explore and express themselves, to learn new skills, and to reinforce social participation and inclusion at all levels of the society and stages of their development (Metz 2011). Professional youth work practice in the Netherlands is open to all young people, but the majority of young people who participate in youth work are from socially deprived and marginalised groups (Sonneveld and Metz 2015). Through various activities and youth work methods (e.g., social group work, information and advice services, and detached youth work), youth workers provide support and guidance to young people.

A comparative study of five European countries (i.e., England, Finland, Estonia, Italy, and France) points out the positive impact of youth work practice on five outcomes: relating to others, sense of self, creating places and spaces for young people, social inclusion, and experimental learning (Ord et al. 2018). Similarly to that study, Dutch empirical studies (Koops et al. 2013; Rumping et al. 2017; Schaap et al. 2017) have reported a positive impact

on gaining new social skills, meeting and bonding with peers, participation in voluntary and civic activities, and finding additional support from other services and institutions. A recent large-scale effect study confirmed a positive contribution of youth work practice to personal development and social participation of socially vulnerable young people (Sonneveld et al. 2021). According to the authors, youth work contributes to strengthen self-responsibility and capabilities of young people, helping them find appropriate help and support outside youth work practice and stabilising and preventing escalation of severe problems.

The abovementioned European studies describe the contribution and effects of youth work practice in an offline context, without making a distinction between offline and online youth work practice. In recent years, a growing number of studies in Western societies have examined online youth work practice and its impact on young people's development. In the United States, studies have investigated the use of digital music and therapeutic songwriting with adolescents (Tepper et al. 2019) as well as online support for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood (Kvasny 2019). However, data from non-Western countries remain limited (Zaremohzzabieh et al. 2020). Existing examples from non-Western contexts include Malaysian research on young people's learning through digital technologies (Meng et al. 2020) and the role of mobile phone communication in youth-adult partnership (Fadzil 2020). Among the European studies, researchers have examined the ways digital youth workers perceive and evaluate the social impact of their work (Pawluczuk et al. 2019) and conducted a survey of digital youth work in the context of cyber resilience in Scotland (YouthLink Scotland 2023). According to the latter study, the digital activities of youth workers contribute to youth work outcomes in seven areas: developing health and well-being, developing and managing relationships, creating and applying learning, participating safely in groups and teams, considering risks and decisions, growing as active citizens, and growing through new experiences. In our previous study, we identified six developmental needs of young people in the online lifeworld (Todorovic et al. 2023). Table 1 compares our six needs with the seven outcomes described in YouthLink Scotland (2023).

Table 1. The developmental needs of young people in their online lifeworld (Todorovic et al. 2023) and digital youth work outcomes (YouthLink Scotland 2023).

(Todorovic et al. 2023) Developmental Needs	Description	YouthLink Scotland (2023) Outcomes
1. Peer interactions, friendships, and (intimate) relationships	Engaging in and having positive interactions with peers; building friendships and engaging in (intimate) relationships	Developing and managing relationships
2. Online safety and privacy	Influence of the online lifeworld on the safety and privacy of young people and how to cope with online risks	Participating safely in groups and teams and considering risks and decisions
3. Identity formation and self-presentation	Influence of the online lifeworld on identity formation, adolescents' self-image, and online self-presentation	Growing as active citizens
4. Talent development	Online spaces and opportunities to discover and shape interests and talents; to develop talents in music, sports, visual arts, podcasting, etc.; and to present talents to others	Creating and applying learning and growing through new experiences
5. Assessing online information	Influence of the online lifeworld on searching, finding, interpreting, and evaluating information	Considering risks and decisions
6. Health and well-being	Impact of the online lifeworld on adolescents' health and well-being	Developing health and well-being

Specifically, the seven youth work outcomes from the YouthLink survey relate to the six developmental needs we previously identified. The need for identity formation

and self-presentation and the outcome growing as active citizens may not directly align with each other, but one can assume that identity formation involves how individuals see themselves and engage with society. Further, the findings from [YouthLink Scotland \(2023\)](#) do not provide qualitative descriptions of the registered contributions to youth work outcomes. Still, these findings offer a foundation for further exploration into how young people benefit in the six areas outlined in [Table 1](#), particularly through professional online youth work practice.

From a developmental perspective, needs 1, 3, and 4 and the corresponding outcomes ([Table 1](#)) align closely with key developmental tasks in adolescence (i.e., identity formation and peer relationships; [Greenfield and Yan 2006](#); [Nesi et al. 2020](#); [Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017](#)). Adolescents seek interactions with peers, social approval, and identity affirmation, often finding validation, role models, and friends across both offline and online environments ([Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017](#)). With age, they pursue greater autonomy and begin to define personal values, beliefs, skills, and talents. In addition to these developmental needs, [Table 1](#) outlines three other needs specific to the online context: the need for online safety and privacy, the need for assessing online information, and the need for health and well-being. These needs emerge from adolescents' interactions with peers, adults, and digital media and tools, which influence their behaviour, social connections, and overall development both online and offline ([Nesi et al. 2020](#); [O'Neill 2015](#)). In this paper, we build on previous findings about youth work outcomes and developmental needs of young people in the online lifeworld and try to explore the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld to meeting the six developmental needs. As youth work is developmentally oriented and responsive to the needs of young people, we expect that in online interactions with young people, youth workers address the developmental needs as formulated in the different wordings in [Table 1](#).

2. Methods

A qualitative research design was used to explore how youth work practice in the online lifeworld contributes to personal and social development of young people from the perspectives of youth workers and young people. The aim was to identify the specific benefits of youth work practice in the online lifeworld regarding young people and their developmental needs. The research was conducted in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic (December 2021 to April 2022), in close collaboration with 14 youth work organisations¹. Three research instruments were used for the data collection.

First, youth workers kept a weekly digital diary to record their interactions, experiences, and observations related to supporting young people online. The participating youth workers were asked to describe their actions during the online interactions with young people and the observed and registered positive impact on young people. For example: did young individuals receive advice regarding their question or need? What did they do with that advice? What positive changes were observed in the lives/development of young people? After 5 weeks of keeping digital diaries, submitting a completed diary to the first author each week, we decided to discontinue the use of this instrument due to its labour-intensive nature. The participating youth workers experienced difficulties in completing this task each week. In addition, the descriptions in the diaries were often very sparse, vague, and not concrete enough. Still, a total of 48 diaries were collected and included in the final analysis as they provided relevant information for probing regarding the research topic.

Second, due to challenges with collecting the data through digital diaries and to avoid bias in analysing sparse and vague data, we decided to complement this instrument with semi-structured interviews. They were conducted with both young people ($N = 37$)

and youth workers ($N = 25$) to gain in-depth insights into their experiences, perspectives, and perceptions regarding the contribution of youth work in the online lifeworld. The participating youth workers and young people gave their permission to participate in this research by signing an informed consent form.

Lastly, in addition to digital diaries and semi-structured interviews, two intervision meetings with the participating youth workers were held. These two meetings aimed to further deepen the insights from the interviews and digital diaries. During these meetings, youth workers shared their experiences, discussed challenges, and built insights and knowledge regarding their work in the online lifeworld and the contribution they made to personal and social development of young people.

2.1. Procedure

2.1.1. Digital Diaries

In total, 25 youth workers participated in keeping digital diaries on their online interactions with young people. The youth workers were selected by the managers of the participating youth work organisations with the following criteria: a minimum of 1 year of experience working in the online lifeworld and regular online contact and interactions with young people. These criteria aimed to ensure that the participating youth workers were able to reflect on their actions and experiences and had sufficient contact with young people to observe meaningful changes in their behaviour and lives. The guideline for writing digital diaries was described in a data collection protocol, which was used to train the youth workers in data collection. In diaries, youth workers were asked to report weekly on how they work in the online lifeworld of young people, and how in doing so, through responding to the developmental needs of young people, they contribute to personal development and social participation of young people. For this purpose, the youth workers used a format digital diary. This format helped reporting in a consistent manner, ensuring the quality and completeness of the data.

The digital diary consisted of two parts. In the first part, youth workers were asked to describe a maximum of three situations where they would answer the following questions: what prompted the contact with the young person(s)? What were the aims to achieve with young person(s)? How did the interaction with young person(s) go? What were you able to accomplish with the young person(s)? In the second part of the digital diary, youth workers were asked to describe to what developmental needs of young people they were able to make a positive contribution in the past week(s). Youth workers were supposed to describe any positive changes in young people's lives regarding the six developmental needs and what actions they were involved to make this contribution. We chose to ask youth workers to only register the positive experiences and contributions. The focus on mainly positive experiences and contributions in digital diaries and interviews provided an opportunity to pinpoint what works in online youth work practice and how positive change can be further facilitated and fostered. The opportunity to also critically discuss the challenges in the online lifeworld was ensured in the subsequent intervision meetings. Once a week, youth workers completed a digital diary in a Word document and sent it back to the first author through the secure software SURFfilesender. In this way, data from young people were recorded anonymously, safeguarding the privacy of all respondents.

2.1.2. Semi-Structured Interviews with Youth Workers

The 48 digital diaries provided a certain amount of relevant information that was used as a starting point in the follow-up interviews. The participating youth workers ($N = 25$) were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The interview questions were based on those from the digital diary format. Unlike the digital diaries, youth workers were given

the opportunity to discuss in detail several of their most significant online interactions with young people, particularly those where they noted a positive contribution to the young people's development. The data obtained from the digital diaries also served as a starting point for additional questions during the interviews, especially in cases where the data were sparse, vague, or lacked detail. All the interviews took place through the MS Teams software. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for the analysis. The first author conducted most of the interviews with youth workers, supported by a colleague from the same faculty department. Both researchers have extensive experience in designing and conducting research on youth work and related social issues, but neither has worked directly in youth work practice. Their outsider position provided analytical distance, while the long-term involvement of the youth workers in the research project (i.e., more than a year) helped build mutual trust and familiarity. This trust enabled respondents to speak openly and reflect deeply on the topics discussed. The researchers remained attentive to how their academic background and perspectives might shape data collection and interpretation, and engaged in regular peer debriefing to ensure that the youth workers' voices were accurately and respectfully represented.

2.1.3. Semi-Structured Interviews with Young People

For the interviews with young people, youth workers took on the role of research assistants and conducted the interviews themselves. We chose this approach because youth workers are already involved in the (online) lives of young people and have established meaningful relationships and trust with them. Additionally, young people who use youth work services often belong to a hard-to-reach target group. By involving youth workers as research assistants, it was possible to include 38 young people in the study (20 female and 18 male respondents), who reflected on their positive experiences in online interactions with youth workers. During the interviews, youth workers asked young people to discuss how they are supported with their developmental needs in their online lifeworld and how this contributes to their personal development and social participation. To safeguard the privacy of the young people, each respondent was assigned a numerical code from 1 to 38 by the youth workers. The audio recordings of the interviews were sent by the youth workers to the first author using the secure software SURFfilesender.

2.1.4. Intervision Meetings

To further deepen the insights from the digital diaries and interviews with youth workers and young people, two intervision meetings were held with the participating youth workers. Intervision refers to a structured peer-learning method in which professionals meet to reflect on their practice, exchange experiences, and explore solutions to challenges they meet in practice (De Haan 2001). The first intervision meeting took place 1 month after the start of the data collection through digital diaries and the second one occurred after all the interviews had been completed. The first meeting was online, using MS Teams, and the second one took place in person at the campus of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Both meetings were supervised by the first author, who took the role of meeting facilitator. The facilitator remained neutral in the meetings, giving space and opportunities for all opinions to be heard, while also being transparent to the respondents about his double role in the research.

The intervision meetings were conducted through five steps (De Haan 2001): situation description (e.g., introducing a situation), problem exploration (e.g., exploring the introduced situation by asking questions), analysis (e.g., group members give their analysis of the introduced situation), shared understanding (e.g., through discussion coming to shared

understanding of the situation), and evaluation (critically discussing the challenges in the online lifeworld, and evaluating the process).

2.2. Analysis

The data from the digital diaries, interviews with youth workers and young people, and intervention meetings were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method facilitates the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the data (Flick 2014; Lapadat 2010). Four key stages—coding, theme development, theme review, and theme description (Braun and Clarke 2006)—were followed to identify key outcomes. The initial coding framework was made based on the six developmental needs and seven outcomes from Table 1 and was further refined by incorporating codes emerging from the data itself (i.e., inductive thematic analysis). This resulted in a framework containing 33 codes regarding the outcomes as a possible contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld. Two colleagues independently examined the coding to ensure that it was analysed thoroughly and that no bias was introduced into the interpretation of the data. In the second stage, through processes of categorisation and re-categorisation in the framework, 14 distinct outcomes were identified regarding the possible contribution of youth work to meet the six developmental needs of young people. The identified outcomes included the seven outcomes from the initial coding framework. In the third stage, the identified outcomes were reviewed in relation to the coded data and the research question (Braun and Clarke 2012). During this step, for each developmental need, three or four outcomes were refined and given their final substantive structure. In the final stage, the defined and reviewed outcomes were described with particular attention to how they addressed the research question. Throughout this process, additional details were added to the defined outcomes to describe the specific areas in which online youth work contributes to particular outcomes. The descriptions of outcomes are presented in the following section.

3. Results

For each developmental need in Table 1, the findings are described—through the identified outcomes—from the perspectives of youth workers and young people. The quotes presented in this section are used to clarify the contribution identified in the data.²

3.1. Contribution to Peer Interactions, Friendships, and (Intimate) Relationships

For this developmental need, we explored how youth work practice in the online lifeworld contributes to positive peer interactions, meeting new people, making new friends, and engaging in healthy (intimate) relationships. We identified three outcomes, describing a possible contribution of youth work practice relevant to this topic: (1) developing and managing relationships, (2) participating safely in groups and teams, and (3) raising awareness.

First, most of the interviewed young people explicitly noted that because of the online contact and activities of youth workers, they were able to meet other peers and start new friendships.

Before I met you guys, I only had one group of friends and that was just a few friends together and that was it. I had no contact with other people. But when I started hanging online with you guys I got to know more people too. . . (Interview with a young person)

We also had a conversation about how I can also feel lonely, given that I can be quite disconnected at times. I feel that I created a deep connection with you and that can help me in my other social circles. (Interview with a young person)

Second, in online interactions with young people, youth workers address young people on their sometimes inappropriate and negative reactions on social media. The data

provided a few examples where young people would make exaggerated and negative comments on someone else's online post just to get more likes and attention from other social media users, or examples of young people disturbing online group activities by starting an argument about things that are often easy to solve. In these situations, youth workers usually give space to young people to explain their reactions, and they calm a heated situation, address this negative behaviour, and give examples of positive reactions in similar occurrences. However, youth workers also noted that their contribution to positive online interactions is somewhat difficult to achieve. Young people want to obtain a certain image and status on social media and some of these young people chose a way to achieve this by posting sensational content online and giving negative and exaggerated reactions to other content.

To be honest, it's difficult [to encourage a positive behaviour]. For many young people, a certain lifestyle and social media are very important. It's all about how you are seen by others online. If you are the one with a lot of followers or a lot of likes, it affects your status and how others see you. (Interview with a youth worker)

Third, regarding the online interactions, the data showed that young people value youth workers' intentions to contribute to raising awareness among young people about possible risks of engaging in (intimate) interactions online with unknown people.

I was always in a group chat with other people from all over the Netherlands that I didn't know. You made me realise that people are not always as they pretend to be or who they are. Since then, I did start paying attention. I think that was a big thing [. . .] You made me understand that sharing is not something wrong, but it depends on how you share it, that it's not my fault and that I can share things, but it's just to protect me from others. (Interview with a young person)

You also talked about the sexual contacts online. That applies to me as well. I had a whole list. That was in my dating phase. Then I wasn't comfortable in my own skin either. I was doing a lot of things that were not right for me. You helped me understand how unsafe that was and I also got advice from you. Sometimes I acted according to your advice and sometimes not. (Interview with a young person)

In such situations, youth workers noted that their role is to raise awareness among young people that experimenting with their sexuality is completely normal, while also emphasising the potential risks associated with online dating. This is particularly important when young people engage in online dating with older individuals. For example, a youth worker described a case where a 17-year-old girl met an older man online and began dating him. At the time, it was an online trend to date older men because they already had jobs and an income, offering the promise of a more luxurious lifestyle. Youth workers noted in the intervention meetings that in such cases, they often step in, adopting the role of an older sibling or parental figure, to engage in discussions with these young people.

So, I just yes wanted her to become a little bit aware and to know what she's doing [. . .] she's a girl who can't have these kind of conversations at home, she is also keeping this as a secret to her friends. (Interview with a youth worker)

By engaging in conversation with young people, youth workers aim to create awareness about the potential risks of such relationships, as well as the dangers of sharing intimate photos with others.

3.2. Contribution to Online Safety and Privacy

Regarding the contribution to online safety and privacy, we identified four outcomes based on the data: (1) raising awareness, (2) towards positive change, (3) considering risks and decisions, and (4) creating and applying new learning.

First, building upon the findings in the previous section, and specifically related to engaging in online dating, the analysis revealed a complementary perspective on online safety and privacy. While youth workers encourage young people to explore their sexuality and to engage in intimate relationships with peers, they also try to educate them on the possible risks of online dating. The interviewed young people pointed out that youth workers help them to be aware of these risks and to be careful when online dating and sharing privacy sensitive information.

Think twice before you do something. Not once, but twice! I get it, it's tempting, you want to send some pictures or sext. . . but often you don't know the intentions of the other person. There are men who pretend to be sweet and they take advantage of. . . and you realise that when it's already too late. It's not always easy, but try to be more careful. (Interview with a young person)

But now I'm really much more conscious of what I post online. I really think 10 times before I post anything on my stories. (Interview with a young person)

Second, several of the interviewed young people mentioned that because of the contact with youth workers and the conversations with them on the subject of online security and privacy, they have become more aware of potential online risks and their online interactions and actions have become more thoughtful and considered. However, the data also showed that it takes time for young people to be fully aware of the consequences, to take the advice from youth workers, and to act upon it. Youth workers are constantly investing time towards making positive change regarding raising awareness of possible security and privacy issues.

I've shared a lot of photos and also videos and I didn't know what could happen. But how I stand in my life now and if now my picture or a video is exposed that's between me and the God. That's how I see it. Look, if your photos are exposed it hurts also your mother, your father, brother and sister. That's not at all how you want it to be. So I keep that in mind too, because that hurts them too. And yes, you [youth worker] always talked with me about this issue, but I did it anyway. Five times I made the same mistake sharing my private photos but not anymore. (Interview with a young person)

You also see on Telegram that young people are approached for criminal activities. And mainly we try to educate young people. . . young people who are approached as money mules, like hey you, you get some money and all you have to do is like hand over your bank card and it's done. Well, that sounds too good to be true for a lot of young people, but they're not aware of the consequences and they almost always get caught. . . so you are very much working on that awareness. (Intervision meeting)

Third, aligning with the perspectives of young people on exposing and online dating, the data also showed similar contributions of youth work practice regarding other safety and privacy issues, such as cyberbullying, data leaks, money muling, and online gambling. The data analysis showed that young people learn about the importance of online privacy and the risks of engaging in unrealistic and fast online opportunities for making money from youth workers.

I learned a lot from you that you have to be very careful on the Internet, things you post are never completely safe. . . But I also learned to have some kind of obligation if you see it [cyberbullying] on the Internet that you don't forward it to other people but

that you maybe do something positive with it or something like that. (Interview with a young person)

We also have an example of a young person who comes to our youth club, he has €5000 in debt now. He shared his bank account number online. It was said to him if you give your account number, money will come into it and this much percent you can keep from it. Well, he thought: 'perfect', but now he has debts. For these issues we also have a separate department that we can consult for advice. We always share this on our social media accounts and alert young people to pay attention to this scam. And often you do see that there are always a few young people who would say yeah, I've experienced that. And then we have conversation with them, often offline. (Interview with a youth worker)

Lastly, in addition to talking with young people and discussing issues about online security and privacy, the data included a couple of examples of how youth workers use digital tools (e.g., video games, escape rooms or virtual reality [VR] glasses) to contribute to reinforcement of safe online behaviour among young people.

Cyber 24 is a kind of video game about how young people deal with money and what the consequences are if you lend your card to someone, if you share your card information online and that you have to be very careful with your identity both online and offline. This game showed where I can go wrong and that I don't make mistakes again. Look, I won't make the same mistakes again, I learned so much from this game. It's good for young people to see that it can go very wrong, so to speak. (Interview with a young person)

3.3. Contribution to Identity Formation, Self-Image, and Self-Presentation

We identified four outcomes: (1) providing online/offline spaces, (2) growing as active citizens, (3) considering risks and decisions, and (4) towards positive change.

First, regarding identity formation, the participating young people and youth workers noted the available online and offline spaces for identity exploration. These spaces provide an opportunity for young people to explore, express, and experiment with different aspects of their identity. When needed, they can get support by professionals or peers there.

I have a group for LGBTQI+ youth and we meet weekly. But we also have a group app, because a lot of those young people... they are still very anxious or they are not yet out of the closet at home, or it is not accepted at home and then it is difficult to actually physically join the group. They start by joining online in the group chat and then we just go there to get acquainted with everyone, have a chat and they can also tell their story, ask questions if they're up against something, and they can ask for advice from the other young people in the group. And then sometimes it does lead to them physically participate in the group after a while. And some of them stay only online. (Intervision meeting)

Supporting identity formation and exploration, youth workers initiate and engage in conversations with young people, making them comfortable being themselves and learning new things from other perspectives regarding their own identity.

...you do have to think about what you're saying, but it also gives you insights about who you are as a person in the situations that you're not used to. You learn a lot of things about yourself which of course has an impact on your self-image and also on your identity and yes, that's actually where I feel supported by conversations with youth workers. (Interview with a young person)

Second, the data revealed that youth workers face challenges in competing with the influence of social media on the lives and development of young people, particularly in fostering positive self-image formation and encouraging positive behaviour. Through open conversations with youth workers, young people can gain new perspectives on social

media, helping them understand that not everything they encounter online should be taken as a reference point or an ideal to strive for.

I think I felt very insecure. Mostly because of Instagram. It's really an unachievable ideal and I think also that I made very unrealistic demands on myself to look a certain way and live a certain life. So, I was always jealous of that. You showed me that being a bit insecure is not a bad thing, but not to let it affect your life. I thought that was a very good message for me to take. It's not that no one is insecure, everyone is a little bit insecure and it's about what you do with it, leave it behind and be proud of who and what you are. That did something for me and I often think about it when I feel insecure or something. So, that helped me a lot. (Interview with a young person)

Yeah, to some rappers I do look up to, for example the nice clothes they have or expensive cars, but yeah. . . what I say I'm still young and I don't know where I am in life. So, say when I'm being mentored [by youth workers], when you say to me to better find a job and to take initiative by myself to achieve the same thing by working. Yes, I really like that you say that. (Interview with a young person)

Third, building on the findings about the online privacy from the previous section, the data revealed that young people are not always aware of the information they share online and how these actions can influence their lives. With this in mind, youth workers try to contribute to a positive self-presentation of young people online because it is not always self-evident for young people how and which aspects of their identity and lives to share online.

So really literally you taught me how I can use Instagram, but also what photos do you post online and things like that. We also all discussed, how do you profile yourself online, but also who do you follow. You also showed me, for example, an account where things that fit my culture were explained. . .that just suited me and I also learned that from you. It was also kind of a domino effect by learning one thing I could learn other things again, but the base was always you. (Interview with a young person)

I am now thinking more carefully about how I want to portray myself online and how others can see me. You made me more aware of that, what image of myself I can give to others and how easy it is to get a reputation online when you don't mean it that way at all. Thanks to the conversations with you [youth worker] and with other girls in the group, this issue is much clearer now for me. (Interview with a young person)

Lastly, it can be difficult for youth work practice to contribute to positive self-image and self-presentation and the improvement of low self-esteem.

We're definitely going to have the conversation about what do you put online. But also what do you do online of course. [. . .] That's really such a long run, and sometimes things just have to go wrong. For example, sometimes something has to happen to a girl that she then realise, OK, now I know how it works and now I shouldn't be doing that anymore. (Interview with a youth worker)

Yes, she has a low self-esteem. So, she thought she was a problem when it's really not. So, I did have to talk to her a few times. . . I tried to prepare her a little bit for this kind of situations and for example, tomorrow a job interview. And then we practiced that job interview and I gave her a lot of compliments, to get her self-esteem up a bit more. Yes, she did feel a little better prepared today and you can see that she starts to shine when she gets a compliment. But self-esteem is of course not so easily solved. (Interview with a youth worker)

Some of the participants mentioned that it is not clear whether the conversations with young people impact their behaviour or rather they receive advice but do not act upon it.

Youth workers themselves expressed that this is a challenge. They pointed out that positive change in young people's development can take a lot of time.

3.4. Contribution to Talent Development

For this specific need, we describe how youth work in the online lifeworld contributes to discovering, shaping, developing, and presenting various talents of young people. The data revealed four outcomes: (1) providing online/offline spaces, (2) connecting with peers and adults, (3) promoting talents, and (4) growing through new experiences.

First, both young people and youth workers mentioned multiple times that young people benefit from the online and offline spaces that youth work offers for talent development. These spaces are often online platforms or offline spaces in youth clubs where young people can share, promote, and explore their talents (e.g., music or art), and where they can learn and improve talents together with peers and professionals.

I'm in a group app, this is on the initiative of a youth worker, and there are a lot of new people in a group app who are all into music or poetry. And all kinds of things are shared there and we inspire each other all the time. (Interview with a young person)

We recently organised an online festival. . . , not only for gaming but we also had a talk show, we had music streams, and we invested a lot in talent development. It was organised from a youth club and in that way we provide a platform for young people to show their talent. (Interview with a youth worker)

Second, besides providing spaces for young people to explore their talents, youth workers work actively online to reach out to other young people who are not aware of these spaces and do not use the possibilities youth work has to offer for talent development. The analysis showed that youth workers usually contact these young people on social media after seeing, for example, their interests in music, art, or other fields. After making contact with these individuals, they connect them (with their consent) to a group chat with other peers with the same interests. Thereafter, these young people come together and start practicing their talents—music, dancing, singing, rapping, acting, or something else—together, with assistance with youth workers (when needed).

I had one guy who played guitar very well but always alone. He just couldn't take that step to approach other young people to play together, I think he was afraid to do that. And actually, from the group chat [the youth worker added this young person to a group chat with other peers who were playing music] we slowly made transition to the youth club where they now rehearse together and they also go together to other events. (Interview with a youth worker)

I put young people in the sport group chat, in the music group chat and in the podcast group chat. And they responded positively to this. And then if there's an activity or a project that I can offer them, I can ask them easily in these chat groups if they would like to participate, sometimes it is even a paid project where they can earn some extra money. (Interview with a youth worker)

In addition to youth workers actively seeking out young people online to support them in developing their talents, young people also reach out to these professionals after discovering online what they have to offer.

I'm into music myself, so to speak, and then I came across online that you also have a studio. (Interview with a young person)

A girl sent me a message via Instagram something like: "I saw a podcast that you made. I happen to know someone who knows you and also comes to one of your projects. This guy told me you guys have space to record a podcast. I would like to record podcasts."

Well, then I started a conversation with her. What is it about, what are your topics for a podcast? She explained that she wants to make a podcast about life and death, losing someone close to you and the feelings that go with it. And that was her first podcast that she arranged and also with a guest speaker. (Interview with a youth worker)

After seeing and experiencing what youth workers do in the area of talent development and what activities and projects they offer, some young people also decide to use their own talents to inspire other peers.

I had my own cooking vlog and I was making videos every week on how to cook things. It was kind of a diary for myself of how I started cooking, but also to inspire other people to start new hobby, give people advice what is healthy eating, you know.

Youth Worker: So you are actually creating content yourself to inspire others?

Yes, voila. Youth Lab [Youth Work activity] inspired me and I inspire someone else and so it goes on. (Interview with a young person)

Third, the other area where youth work practice tries to contribute to talent development of young people is online promotion and positive reinforcement. Youth workers use their social media channels and their followers to promote and share young people's art and music. They also actively scroll through various accounts and like and leave positive words and encouragement in the comments or private messages.

I see that the youth club is always sharing things of mine online and I like that. I don't think every youth club does that and shares things of young people online. When my single was out two years ago I've seen that you shared it on Instagram and Facebook and that's really cool to see. . . In terms of promotion, it helps and youth workers advise me how to promote my music. (Interview with a young person)

We really supported him to give him more online exposure. . . We've done photo shoots with him and he became very big on Instagram and we share his mix tape always. We shared when he had parties, we did that on our social media accounts. . . and then you really see that he and his peers appreciate that very much. (Intervision meeting)

This online promotion and positive reinforcement also transfers to the offline environment, where youth workers try to connect young people with venues where they can have their first performances.

I follow online some young people who rap and there was this young man. . . I always try to follow them and to see what they do. . . this guy who really had talent and I actually started talking with him right away about music and where he records and how does it go? And he talked very enthusiastically about it and then I connected him to a venue with a program manager who organises gigs at the library. And well, so at the end he did two or three gigs at the library and I went to see one. That's kind of funny in itself, because it's a library and you see all these young guys wearing hoodies at a gig between all the books at the library. (Interview with a youth worker)

The last outcome is closely connected to the previously described need for self-presentation. However, here the data revealed more specifically how youth workers also contribute to positive self-presentation of young people online by helping young people to develop their talents. The following quote illustrates how a youth worker reinforces writing positive lyrics in songs and leaving behind the image of bad boys among young people.

Young people want to become drill rappers. It appears that they want to make drill rap because it is an online hype/trend. They want to be seen as tough bad guys but they don't always like this kind of music. I try to make them develop their talents, introduce them to other music and to actually make love songs; emphasise that they can make more money

with that. Young people who want to experiment with their artistic/musical side and develop their talents can record and produce songs in the studio with the support of youth work. (Intervision meeting)

3.5. Contribution to Online Information Assessment

The analysis resulted in three outcomes that describe the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld to addressing this need: (1) navigating through the online lifeworld, (2) dealing with online information, and (3) towards positive change.

First, the respondents pointed out the practical support youth workers provide to young people in navigating their lives through various online applications and information assessment, which is not always easy for young people. The respondents provided examples of successfully applying online, with assistance from youth workers, for rent allowance or a digital ID, among other administrative services.

If you weren't there or you weren't within arm's reach, so to speak, I could just text you. . . yes, sometimes contact Via Instagram. . . That's still handy if I didn't know something about my DigiD [digital ID] or rent allowance applications. (Interview with a young person)

I learned, say about applying for certain benefits online, what to look out for if I'm going to move, and things like that. . . Awareness of those kinds of aspects. You were easy to reach Via WhatsApp and also Via Zoom we had a meeting and that was pleasant and very accessible. That did make me feel supported. (Interview with a young person)

Additionally, the data revealed a contribution to navigating young people's lives through various social media accounts and websites. This endeavour involves finding and using relevant online information for their daily life activities.

You gave me tips and tricks on how to use social media and you informed me on how to use it all. So, now I know how to act on social media. (Interview with a young person)

When I had to do a report for school, then I had to find reliable sources and it wasn't allowed to be Wikipedia. Then you did teach me how to use Google docs and how to use the library. So, I really liked that too. You also taught me how to use Google safely. You taught me that as well. Boy, how much I learned from you, if I do say so! I didn't realise that at all. (Interview with a young person)

Second, a possible contribution of youth work practice can be seen in process of discussing the topic of fake news with young people, how to distinguish real from false information and in that way improve the information assessment of young people.

We used an example of Trump, because he was always very funny in a very bizarre way and the things he did. We would ask is it true or not true? No, it's not true. Well, then we would check this information and it turned out it was true.[. . .] And then we would together do the fact check. And then you do start making them think and what I did notice with those young people that in this way it works to let them think about fake news. You plant a seed in them to start thinking more. (Interview with a youth worker)

What I got from this is that I shouldn't interpret everything negatively and also that I shouldn't suffer because of it. Before this, I didn't really know how to deal with fake news and. . . everything I read on Instagram and on social media was real to me. (Interview with a young person)

Lastly, the data also revealed that the contribution to successfully distinguish true from false information is often difficult to see or it takes time to be registered.

We always start with a question, what is your source? That's our first question, always, what is your source? If it's TikTok, then usually they start laughing. But yes, in this way

you also make young people think of why is everyone laughing if I say TikTok? Why? Why didn't you get it from another source or something? Thus in that way we talk further about this topic. (Interview with a youth worker)

I never try to judge young people if they believe in some idea or information unless I see it's really worrisome. Then I have to say something about it. But I think most youth workers start by just asking very open and critical questions and that often does manage to get you to the heart of the message you want to send to young people. And we also did a conspiracy theory podcast. But sometimes it can be difficult, to be very honest. Sometimes it's important just to discuss a topic or a subject. (Interview with a youth worker)

Youth workers seek to support young people in this need by continuously asking critical questions, encouraging them to reflect on the issue, verifying their information sources, and assisting them in identifying and using accurate and relevant information.

3.6. Contribution to Health and Well-Being

We identified three outcomes describing the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld to improve the health and well-being of young people: (1) developing and managing relationships, (2) developing health and well-being, and (3) raising awareness.

First, youth workers reported that they try to tackle the issue of loneliness among young people by getting in touch with them online, adding them to themed online group chats, introducing them to interesting online or offline activities within or outside youth work practice, and connecting them with other peers who have similar interests. By following this approach, youth workers try to lead young people to offline activities and face-to-face contact with them or other young people.

A boy who had little to no friends, no contacts, just moved to a new area, so I then introduced him to a quite a lot of activities in his neighbourhood and also I've connected him with our organisation and young people here. And just like that the problem was resolved. (Interview with a youth worker)

Additionally, young people noted the importance of contact with youth workers when they feel alone and lonely. They perceive this contact as trustworthy, friendly, and genuine. Young people recognise youth workers as friends or even older brothers or sisters.

I really liked the contact with you when I was alone or when I was feeling down. I could just text you and contact you guys and talk to someone. That was very nice. I think I really struggle to get out of a certain mindset or thoughts and then it was nice to hear a new way thinking or just get tips and tricks from you. That's just really nice. (Interview with a young person)

You always ask how I'm doing, and how my situation is, and how things are going at home. I think that's very important that someone asks me all the time how I'm doing. Not everybody does that and then I think oh yeah, somebody still thinks about me. Yes, I find that very important. (Interview with a young person)

Second, young people highlighted that online contact with youth workers—who listen to the problems with which they are coping—is helpful in dealing with these problems. These young people often do not have any significant or trustworthy adults in their immediate environment with whom they can share their struggles or ask for advice.

Just being there. . . being very active on WhatsApp and that did a lot, because you then need someone who is maybe not very close, but knows enough about it. And then a youth worker is actually perfect for that. They can still watch from a distance and respond to what is going on and what's happening with me. (Interview with a young person)

What makes it hard for these girls to deal with mental health that goes down hard, or if you treat your mental health improperly, or if you were abused. . . These girls can't talk about it at home. We all need someone to talk to, and that already means a lot for these girls. (Intervision meeting)

The data revealed the contribution of youth work practice to motivate young people to participate in sports and to change their lifestyle to become healthier. In these situations, youth workers often use their social media channels to promote sports, exercise, and healthy food, and in this way motivate young people to change their unhealthy habits.

I saw some info in the stories about how best to deal with exercise, your own body and food, and I had some interest there, but I didn't know how to start. So, I started reading further to what was said on stories on Instagram. Well, then I texted you and then I had a consultation with you and you gave me some tips on how to start. I picked that up and started eating healthier and exercising and I lost weight. So, in that respect you helped me by putting something online that gave me more information and made me do more. (Interview with a young person)

First of all, I have been in a very dark state for a while and then I got in touch with a boxing school through online contact with you. That boxing school supported me. . . they saw that I had a talent, so I am I there. In the meantime I have developed to 10 weeks of boxing and I want to do the competitions. And without contact with you that would never have come together. (Interview with a young person)

Using the same strategy, youth workers also try to tackle other problems with which young people have to deal, such as depression or suicidal thoughts.

I saw your post about depression and suicide and then we talked about that and about my own safety. I had therapy and because of my suicidal tendencies, because it's tough. . . Well then I responded to your post and then we talked about how I'm doing now and what I can do next, what I can discuss at therapy, whether I can keep it safe for myself. I also had counselling with other professionals, but I think if it hadn't been for youth work I wouldn't have gotten very far either. Actually, right at a perfect moment, I got to know youth work, and, honestly, I wouldn't know where I would be without it. (Interview with a young person)

There was this girl, 16 years old, and I had a meeting with her. Well, then the whole story came out and I was able to direct her to youth care and social services. But she contacted me because we did an online poll. So, you see that if you post something every week, something always comes out of it. (Intervision meeting)

Youth workers are not therapists and do not have the knowledge and expertise to treat serious issues such as depression, suicidal tendencies, and addiction. Instead, they usually talk with young people about these problems: they allow them to be seen and heard and direct and help them to reach out to adequate professionals and institutions.

Well I was suicidal, so in terms of safety and stuff. . .and you said to me like. . .I don't know exactly how to describe it, but you just talked with me, you reassured me and you said to me like it's not good for you and helped me a lot with this problem. You were always available, it's not like you work from 9 to 17. When I text you, you respond right away within a few minutes. (Interview with a young person)

You can simply offer a listening ear, but if he's truly depressed, I can't help young people with depression on my own. In that case, I work together with them to find other forms of help. Essentially, I gave him some tips on how I would approach the situation. (Interview with a youth worker)

Lastly, youth workers make use of social media accounts and online gaming platforms to spread information and to reach out to a larger group of young people.

There was then an article going around about young people and mental health. I then partnered with an online account with a lot of followers to create more reach. The idea was that young people who are struggling with something can send a message, so that we can always offer a listening ear. This was partly in response to the article about young people who had become suicidal... Unfortunately, the person [from the account with a lot of followers] didn't share my message. Still, I eventually received messages from young people, including a girl who wrote, "I want to kill myself". (Interview with a youth worker)

By using these online possibilities, youth workers reach out to vulnerable target groups and also raise awareness among young people about mental health issues and how to cope with them.

3.7. Summary of the Contributions of Youth Work in the Online Lifeworld

The findings described for each developmental need provide an exploration of the contributions of online youth work practice to the development of young people. These contributions are described based on the outcomes of online youth work practice mentioned in Table 1, with the addition of seven newly identified outcomes derived from the data. Table 2 outlines the relationship between the six key developmental needs of young people and the outcomes of online youth work practice as identified in our study, sometimes relating to more than one developmental need. The developmental needs of young people are listed in the first column. The outcomes of youth work in the online lifeworld are organised in the second column. Finally, the third column highlights the specific areas in which online youth work contributes to particular outcomes adding a practical dimension.

Table 2. Contributions of youth work practice in the online lifeworld.

(Todorovic et al. 2023) Developmental Needs	Outcomes	Specific Areas of Contribution
1. Peer interactions, friendships, and (intimate) relationships	Developing and managing relationships	Meeting peers, new friendships
	Participating safely in groups and teams	Positive online interactions
	Raising awareness	(Intimate) online interactions with strangers
2. Online safety and privacy	Raising awareness	Risks of online dating
	Towards positive change	Not fully aware of the consequences
	Considering risks and decisions	Cyberbullying, data leak, money muling, and online gambling
	Creating and applying new learning	Using video games, escape rooms and VR glasses for learning
3. Identity formation and self-presentation	Providing online/offline spaces	Spaces for identity exploration, supporting identity formation
	Growing as active citizens	Fostering meaningful civic lifestyles
	Considering risks and decisions	Positive online self-presentation
	Towards positive change	Fostering positive self-image and self-presentation and improving low self-esteem

Table 2. Cont.

(Todorovic et al. 2023) Developmental Needs	Outcomes	Specific Areas of Contribution
4. Talent development	Providing online/offline spaces	Spaces for talent development and exploration
	Connecting with peers and adults	Reaching out and engagement with young people
	Promoting talents	Promotion and positive encouragement of young people's talents
	Growing through new experiences	Talent development and positive self-presentation
5. Assessing online information	Navigating through the online lifeworld	Practical support regarding social media and the Internet, finding and using relevant information
	Dealing with online information	Distinguishing real from false information
	Towards positive change	Successfully dealing with information overload and false information
6. Health and well-being	Developing and managing relationships	Coping with loneliness
	Developing health and wellbeing	Listening ear for problems, engaging in sports, eating healthy food, directing to other professionals
	Raising awareness	Awareness for mental health issues

4. Discussion

We aimed to explore the benefits that young people derive for their personal and social development from youth work practice in the online lifeworld. We started from two previous studies outlining six developmental needs of young people (Todorovic et al. 2023) and digital youth work outcomes (YouthLink Scotland 2023). The findings revealed new insights about the specific areas where online youth work practice makes or lacks a contribution to the six developmental needs of young people. The key findings emerged around providing support for young people to navigate through social media; to gain new and positive experiences, skills, talents, and friends; to increase awareness about possible online risks; and to cope with negative online experiences, loneliness, and mental health issues. In these situations, the outcomes of youth work practice in the online lifeworld sometimes overlap, indicating that different needs may be associated with the same outcomes (i.e., raising awareness, providing online/offline space, and towards positive change). Such overlap suggests a possible interconnection between the identified outcomes. We can assume that contributions in one domain (e.g., talent development or positive self-image) may be transferable to, or related to, others (e.g., peer interactions or healthy lifestyles). Additionally, the respondents pointed out the importance of immediate online contact, online availability, and online proximity of youth workers in supporting young people in their online and offline environments.

Consistent with previous studies on the impact of offline youth work practice (Koops et al. 2013; Ord et al. 2018; Rumping et al. 2017; Schaap et al. 2017; Sonneveld et al. 2021), our findings showed how youth work practice in the online lifeworld contributes to relating to others/making new friendships, a sense of self/identity formation, creating places and spaces for young people, social inclusion/taking part in online and offline activities,

experimental learning/talent development, and helping young people find appropriate support outside youth work practice. Additionally, the findings showed that young people who already receive support from other health and care professionals also benefit from online contact with youth workers. Such online contact helps them be seen and heard and have more direct, accessible, and positive personal interactions. These outcomes are closely aligned with several central frameworks within youth work theory. For instance, youth work is often conceptualised as a space with attention to safety, learning opportunities, and the socialisation of young people (Jeffs and Smith 2010), fostering awareness of one's own position and identity in relation to others and power structures (Coburn and Gormally 2017), and as inclusive spaces designed to welcome all young people (Hatton 2020).

Furthermore, the perspectives gathered from the respondents provide additional understanding regarding which specific aspects of the six developmental needs and the youth work outcomes from the YouthLink Scotland (2023) survey, alongside the seven newly identified outcomes, are being addressed by youth work practice in the online lifeworld. Examples include connecting young people with peers; tackling loneliness; dealing with insecurities; raising awareness about sexting, exposing, money muling, and mental health issues; and promoting and fostering talent development. As these examples suggest, youth workers in the online lifeworld support young people not only with knowledge about risks and possible online and offline challenges, but also with the competencies and adaptive capacities needed to manage those risks and challenges while continuing to benefit from digital technologies (Zaremohzzabieh et al. 2020).

These new perspectives also demonstrate the significance of online youth work practice for the development of young people in both online and offline contexts. Based on the findings, the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld goes further than only the online and digital-related developmental challenges of young people. The online and offline worlds of young people are intertwined (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011); in this hybrid context, online practitioners also successfully help young people deal with various issues. The key components enabling this contribution appear to be the convenience of online contact and the online availability and visibility of youth workers. This is evident with needs regarding dealing with online information, and health, and well-being. Unlike offline youth work practice, the online setting lowers the threshold required for young people to ask for support for the online and offline challenges they meet (European Commission 2017; Todorovic et al. 2023). In this way, youth workers operating in the online lifeworld remain aligned with the central elements of, for example, Smith's (2013) definition of youth work, which emphasises a focus on young people, the cultivation of supportive relationships, a friendly and informal approach, and attention to their education and overall welfare. Moreover, as these elements are seen as fundamental to youth work practice across countries and contexts, the findings of our study, although grounded in European context, may offer valuable insights for youth work practice internationally. From the practice and policy points of view, this should be considered additional evidence for the integration of offline and online youth work practice as they can complement and reinforce each other (Höylä and Reponen 2019; Todorovic et al. 2024).

In some situations, it is difficult to identify the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld. The participating youth workers noted that seeing possible positive changes in young people's actions and behaviour is a time-consuming process. This is evident in the developmental areas regarding fostering positive self-image and self-presentation, and dealing with online safety, privacy, and online information. These findings align with other studies showing that offline youth work practice requires time to make a positive impact on the development of young people (Ord 2014; Sonneveld et al. 2021). Youth workers are spending most of their time interacting with young people,

educating them through conversations, debates, and various activities. However, as a part of their developmental journey, young people also interact with various digital tools and media and are influenced by peers and role models they themselves find important and relevant (Valkenburg and Piotrowski 2017). These influences, either positive or negative, may require less time and may have a more immediate impact on young people's self-image and self-presentation than those exerted by youth workers. Sonneveld et al. (2021) suggest that the positive outcomes on the development of young people are more evident on young people who engage in youth work services for three or more years. This underscores once again the importance of maintaining (online) contact, engaging with young people, and being present in their (online) lifeworld over an extended period to achieve positive changes in their development. The issues of online safety and privacy and dealing with online information can be challenging for both young people and adults. If youth workers are not specifically trained in dealing with online safety and privacy and how to properly educate young people in dealing with it, then youth work practice will have a minimal contribution. While these findings can be valuable for theory and practice, there are some limitations regarding the research design. A focus on positive contributing aspects, the sampling of the respondents, and relying on self-reported data may have introduced bias in the final findings. Additionally, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when face-to-face contact between young people and youth workers was restricted. As a result, youth workers had to rely on digital tools to maintain contact and provide support. Consequently, the findings of this study may reflect a moment in time when the focus of youth work was more on maintaining contact and safeguarding well-being, rather than on broader developmental goals. However, the use of social media and its influence on young people, has not diminished since then. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights on how youth work practice contribute to meeting six developmental needs of young people. Specifically, the shared experiences of the respondents emphasise the role of online presence and availability and immediate contact between practitioners and young people as crucial for helping young people address their developmental needs. This specific feature is only associated with online youth work practice but at the same time complements and reinforces offline practice.

5. Conclusions

We aimed to explore the contribution of youth work practice in the online lifeworld to address six developmental needs of young people. The findings point to various outcomes that outline the contributions of online youth work practice to meet the six developmental needs of young people. These new insights revealed that online contact, presence, and availability of youth workers play an important role in supporting young people meeting their needs, in both the online and offline contexts. From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be valuable for the current scarce theoretical underpinnings of online youth work practice and in defining what impact this practice can have on young people's lives and development. Practitioners can use this knowledge to further develop their practice but also to legitimise their work towards young people as well as youth work's partners and financiers. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact and effects of youth work in the online lifeworld and the development of young people. As the online lifeworld evolves rapidly, the growing influence of artificial intelligence and the increasing involvement of young people in digital criminal activities raise new research questions. The findings described in this study can form a base for future research to better understand the impact of these emerging issues on youth development and youth work practice, and to develop appropriate interventions.

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Notes

- ¹ The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (2021-134703; date of approval: 2 December 2021). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation in this study.
- ² The quotes in this paper were translated from Dutch to English by the first author.

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