



Original research article

# The online environment as a risk factor for suicidal behaviour in adolescents: challenges for social work

Soňa Šrobárová \*, Marek Stachoň

*St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work in Bratislava, Bratislava, Slovak Republic*

## Abstract

**Introduction:** The study examines the relationship between the use of digital environments and suicidal vulnerability among adolescents aged 15–18, emphasizing the implications for contemporary social work practice. The research responds to the growing need for evidence-based approaches to understanding how online interactions influence youth mental health, loneliness, and help-seeking behaviour.

**Methods:** A mixed-methods design was employed. The quantitative component consisted of an electronic questionnaire administered to secondary-school students aged 15–18 ( $n = 168$ ), verified for reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ). The qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with six social workers, thematically analysed and independently coded in MAXQDA ( $\kappa = 0.91$ ). All procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical standards and approved by the institutional ethics committee.

**Results:** The findings indicate that the quality rather than quantity of online engagement significantly influences adolescents' mental well-being. Participants who reported higher levels of loneliness expressed stronger support for the presence of mental-health professionals in digital spaces. Social workers identified cyberbullying, online loneliness, and exposure to suicidal content as major risks, but also recognized digital platforms as emerging opportunities for early prevention and psychosocial support.

**Conclusion:** The results highlight the urgent need to strengthen digital competencies, ethical awareness, and online intervention skills in social work. Developing inclusive, evidence-based prevention strategies tailored to adolescents' digital environments is essential for reducing online risks and promoting youth mental health.

**Keywords:** Adolescent mental health; Digital social work; Loneliness; Online intervention; Suicidal social work

## Introduction

Over the past decade, adolescents' socio-psychological functioning has been profoundly reshaped by everyday digitalization. The internet and social media have become dominant arenas for communication, identity formation, and self-expression. However, these online environments simultaneously expose young users to distress signals – including suicidal ideation and self-harm – within accessible, anonymous, and algorithm-driven spaces that can be both supportive and dangerous (Twenge and Campbell, 2010).

Digital communication has blurred the boundaries between private and public experience. Today's adolescents develop social bonds, seek validation, and process emotions in virtual spaces that often lack adult supervision. These conditions make digital environments a crucial determinant of mental health and a growing concern for social work practice. This study therefore examines how digital interactions relate to loneliness, emotional distress, and suicidal vulnerability in adolescents, and explores what forms of prevention and intervention social work can offer in response to these emerging

challenges (John et al., 2018). Suicidal behaviour represents a major public-health and professional challenge: suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–19 worldwide (WHO, 2021). In Europe – including Slovakia – suicidal ideation, attempts, and deaths have shown an upward trend, with an estimated 20–30 attempts for every completed suicide (WHO, 2021). Adolescence, characterized by identity development, cognitive growth, and emotional instability, increases sensitivity to stressors such as bullying, academic failure, relational rupture, and loneliness (Joiner, 2005). Depressive symptoms, anxiety, and hopelessness may escalate into suicidal behaviour, often following acute affective crises or impulsive decisions made under emotional distress (Kocourková and Koutek, 2017).

Psychological suffering in youth is shaped by a complex interaction of biological and social pressures – hormonal fluctuations, performance demands, social comparison, and the desire for autonomy (Frankl, 2018; Špatenková et al., 2017). Conflicts with parents or peers frequently act as immediate triggers, and feelings of isolation or rejection can deepen under the influence of digital media. Although suicide mortality among children and adolescents is lower than in adults, suicide

\* **Corresponding author:** Soňa Šrobárová, St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Work in Bratislava, Palackého 1, 811 02 Bratislava, Slovak Republic; e-mail: [sona.srobarova@gmail.com](mailto:sona.srobarova@gmail.com)  
<http://doi.org/10.32725/kont.2026.012>

Submitted: 2025-09-29 • Accepted: 2026-01-28 • Prepublished online: 2026-03-04

KONTAKT 28/1: 98–105 • EISSN 1804-7122 • ISSN 1212-4117

© 2026 The Authors. Published by University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license.

remains the second or third leading cause of death in this age group (Špatenková, 2017; WHO, 2021), emphasizing the need for early, context-sensitive health and social responses.

The motives behind suicidal behaviour are multifactorial. Mood and behavioural disorders, substance use, family conflict, and academic failure commonly interact as risk factors (Koutek and Kocourková, 2007). The quality of one's environment also matters: instability, neglect, or exposure to online violence can amplify vulnerability (Pierzak and Bursová, 2024). Statistical data from Slovakia confirm this tendency; among youth aged 15–19, suicide attempts reached 56.4 per 100,000 in 2022, the highest since 2008 (NCZI, 2024). In 2023, pupils and students accounted for 27% of all suicide attempts, with family or relationship conflicts identified as the most frequent motives (NCZI, 2024). Digital life intensifies both risks and opportunities for support. Key risk factors include digital loneliness – the paradox of constant connection without authentic bonding (Bauman, 2003) – as well as cyberbullying (Patchin and Hinduja, 2012), unrealistic social comparison, and unregulated exposure to suicidal or self-harm content (Liu et al., 2020). Algorithmic “echo chambers” can repeatedly present harmful material to vulnerable users while limiting access to protective or educational content (O'Reilly et al., 2018). At the same time, online platforms also provide spaces for help: anonymous counselling, peer-support groups, and psychoeducation initiatives can be valuable resources if guided by trained professionals (Lajčin and Porubčanová, 2021).

Nevertheless, digital practice introduces new ethical and professional dilemmas. Social workers must balance privacy and duty to protect, navigate blurred professional boundaries, and manage the psychological impact of exposure to distressing online material (Reamer, 2013). Beyond individual confidentiality, digital social work raises broader concerns about data security, misinformation, and the risk of secondary trauma for practitioners. These challenges call for explicit ethical frameworks, ongoing supervision, and the integration of digital ethics and technological literacy into social work curricula (NASW, 2021). From a theoretical perspective, Durkheim's classic typology of suicide (1897/2006) remains relevant. Weakened social integration (egoistic suicide) and disrupted norms (anomic suicide) illuminate how online environments can exacerbate adolescent vulnerability. Social networks may heighten isolation despite constant connectivity (Durkheim, 2007; Twenge and Campbell, 2010), while unstable trends, performance pressure, and idealized standards of beauty or success undermine normative stability. In poorly moderated digital spaces, the absence of adult authority and the anonymity of users can normalize self-harm and suicidal discourse (O'Reilly et al., 2018).

For the field of social work, the digital turn introduces technical, methodological, and ethical challenges (Mishna et al., 2022; Reamer, 2013). Many practitioners report feeling underprepared to address digital phenomena, and digital literacy remains uneven across generations and service contexts. Yet adolescents' primary social habitats – Instagram, TikTok, Discord, and other platforms – are precisely where distress signals emerge most visibly (John et al., 2018). Expanding social work into these spaces can fulfill preventive, interventive, and educational goals. Schools play a critical role in shaping digital resilience and awareness, highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration between educators, social workers, and policymakers (Porubčanová et al., 2024; Zapletal et al., 2022). Bridging traditional and digital practice thus requires more than the adoption of online counselling or chat communication. It demands active engagement in digital com-

munities, cooperation with youth influencers and digital mental-health ambassadors, and the creation of safe online environments that promote well-being and inclusion. Systematic development of digital social work must pair technological innovation with critical reflection on equity, access, and ethical responsibility (John et al., 2018; Reamer, 2013;).

Finally, this study addresses a critical research gap by empirically linking adolescents' digital behavior, loneliness, and suicidal vulnerability with implications for social work practice in Slovakia. By integrating quantitative data from adolescents with qualitative insights from social workers, the research provides evidence-based recommendations for developing digital competencies, ethical standards, and prevention strategies tailored to vulnerable youth populations.

## Materials and methods

The research focused exclusively on adolescents aged 15–18, examining the relationship between the use of digital environments and the experience of loneliness, with emphasis on mental health and suicidal vulnerability. Additionally, the study explored adolescents' attitudes toward online support and the presence of professionals in digital spaces.

A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quantitative electronic questionnaire and qualitative semi-structured interviews. Data were collected anonymously. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for studies involving human participants; all participants were guaranteed voluntary participation, anonymity, and the option to withdraw at any time. Prior to data collection, the project was approved by the institutional ethics committee.

Because the participants were minors, the research procedure and ethical safeguards were explained in detail to ensure transparency and compliance with ethical standards. Additional ethical approval was obtained for this subgroup. Consent was secured through educational institutions with the approval of school administrators and the ethics committee. The questionnaire contained no sensitive or identifying questions, and no personal data were collected. The sample consisted of 168 adolescents (15–18 years) from the following secondary schools: St. Andrew's Church Grammar School in Ružomberok, Evangelical Grammar School in Liptovský Mikuláš, Grammar School in Banská Bystrica, Business Academy in Banská Bystrica, and Grammar School in Bratislava.

The electronic questionnaire was distributed between 1 and 30 April 2025 via secure Google Forms links shared through internal school channels and verified online platforms for youth. Each participant could submit only one response. The sample was 59% female, 39% male, and 2% preferred not to specify or identified differently. As all respondents were secondary-school students, the sample represents adolescents closely connected to digital technology and active in online communication spaces. The inclusion of adolescents was motivated by growing evidence that this age group is particularly exposed to digital risks such as cyberbullying, digital loneliness, and suicidal content. The quantitative instrument was verified through pilot testing ( $n = 20$ ) before data collection. Reliability was confirmed by Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ , indicating high internal consistency. The qualitative phase involved six social workers working with adolescents. The interviews were analysed using open and axial coding in MAXQDA software. To ensure objectivity, two independent coders conducted the analysis, achieving intercoder reliability  $\kappa = 0.91$  (Cohen's kappa), confirming the consistency of thematic categorization.

The primary aim of this study was to examine the relationship between adolescents' engagement in digital environments and their experience of loneliness and suicidal vulnerability, with a particular focus on the implications for contemporary social work practice in the Slovak context. Based on the overall research aim, the following partial objectives were defined:

1. To analyse the relationship between the intensity and quality of adolescents' engagement in digital environments and their perceived levels of loneliness and mental well-being.
2. To examine adolescents' exposure to potentially harmful online content, including cyberbullying and suicide-related material, and to assess the role of algorithm-driven content distribution in this exposure.
3. To explore adolescents' attitudes toward online mental-health support, including their trust in digital forms of professional help and their willingness to seek assistance through online channels.
4. To identify gender-related differences in the experience of loneliness and online interaction patterns among adolescents.
5. To assess adolescents' support for the presence of mental health professionals (social workers and psychologists) in digital environments, particularly in relation to experienced loneliness.
6. To explore social workers' perceptions of digital risks affecting adolescents' mental health, with an emphasis on suicidal behaviour, loneliness, and online threats.
7. To evaluate the preparedness of social workers for digital intervention, including their competencies, training needs, and attitudes toward providing online support directly within digital platforms.
8. To identify effective preventive and intervention strategies in digital environments, as perceived by social workers, aimed at reducing digital loneliness and suicidal vulnerability among adolescents.

The partial objectives were addressed using a mixed-methods research design. Quantitative objectives (Objectives 1–5) were examined through statistical analysis of questionnaire data collected from adolescents, while qualitative objectives (Objectives 6–8) were explored through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with social workers.

### **A. Research questions for adolescents (quantitative phase)**

1. How does the intensity of time spent in digital environments relate to adolescents' feelings of loneliness and mental well-being?
2. Is there an association between searching for mental-health information and exposure to suicide-related online content?
3. Are there gender differences in the experience of loneliness among adolescents?
4. Is trust in online mental-health support associated with adolescents' willingness to seek help through online channels?
5. Does experience with cyberbullying influence adolescents' perceptions of the safety of online professional support?
6. Is loneliness associated with adolescents' support for the presence of mental health professionals in digital environments?

### **B. Research questions for social workers (qualitative phase)**

1. How do social workers perceive the impact of the digital environment on youth mental health?

2. According to social workers, what online risks do young people most frequently encounter?
3. Are social workers prepared to intervene concerning digital risks (e.g., suicidal content, cyberbullying)?
4. How do they evaluate the possibility of acting as digital counsellors directly within online spaces?
5. What preventive measures do they consider crucial when working with youth in the context of the digital environment?

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (1964, and subsequent amendments). For participants aged 15–18 years, informed consent was obtained via their educational institutions with approval by the school administration and the ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and could be withdrawn at any time.

## **Results**

### **Results of the quantitative research**

#### *Quantitative findings*

Most respondents reported spending 2–4 hours online per day (38%), while 23% spent more than 7 hours daily, and only 11% spent less than 2 hours. This distribution indicates a high degree of digital integration among adolescents (Table 1).

RQ1 – There was no significant correlation between the number of hours spent online and feelings of loneliness ( $r = -0.024, p = 0.810$ ). These results suggest that the quality rather than the quantity of digital interactions is decisive for well-being (Keles et al., 2020).

RQ2 – We found no association between searching for mental-health information and exposure to suicide-related content ( $\chi^2 = 0.0, p = 1.0$ ). This pattern implies that exposure is largely algorithmic rather than intentionally sought out.

RQ3 – The analysis indicated a trend toward a gender difference in loneliness ( $\chi^2 = 16.17, p = 0.095$ ). Girls reported higher levels of loneliness, which is consistent with research emphasizing increased susceptibility to social comparison among adolescent females (Nesi and Prinstein, 2015).

RQ4 – Trust in online support did not translate into a greater willingness to seek help ( $\chi^2 = 1.91, p = 0.385$ ). Persistent barriers – such as stigma and a preference for face-to-face contact – likely mediate this relationship.

RQ5 – Experience with cyberbullying did not affect adolescents' perceptions of the safety of online professional support ( $\chi^2 = 0.23, p = 0.892$ ). Respondents appear to differentiate between peer-based harm and structured, professional digital services.

RQ6 – There was a strong association between loneliness and endorsement of professional presence online ( $\chi^2 = 41.87, p = 0.0002$ ). Adolescents who experience loneliness actively support the availability of social workers and psychologists in digital spaces.

### **Results of the qualitative research**

Table 2 provides a concise overview of the five thematic categories identified in the qualitative analysis, highlighting the key focus areas and implications for social work practice.

Five main thematic categories emerged from the interviews with social workers:

#### *1. Digital risks*

Social workers identified the digital environment as a significant factor negatively affecting adolescents' mental

**Table 1. Summary of quantitative findings**

Research question	Statistical test	Main result	Interpretation
1. Time spent online vs. loneliness	Pearson correlation	$r = -0.024, p = 0.810$	No significant correlation; quality of interactions is decisive
2. Searching mental health info vs. exposure to suicidal content	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 0.0, p = 1.0$	No association; exposure likely algorithmic
3. Gender differences in loneliness	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 16.17, p = 0.095$	Trend toward significance; females report more loneliness
4. Trust in online support vs. help-seeking	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 1.91, p = 0.385$	No direct link; stigma and preference for face-to-face help
5. Cyberbullying vs. trust in online support	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 0.23, p = 0.892$	No relationship; respondents separate harm from professional help
6. Loneliness vs. support for professionals online	Chi-square	$\chi^2 = 41.87, p = 0.0002$	Strong association; lonely youth support professionals' presence online

**Table 2. Summary of qualitative thematic categories**

Thematic category	Main focus	Key implication for social work
1. Digital risks	Attention and communication problems, imitation of risky behaviours, exposure to suicidal content	Digital space acts as a contextual stressor; requires targeted psychoeducation and monitoring
2. Online threats	Loneliness, cyberbullying, addictions, suicidal communities	Online anonymity creates both risks and opportunities for early identification of distress
3. Readiness for online interventions	Insufficient training and methodological support	Digital competencies and supervision must become part of social work education
4. Digital support	Presence on youth platforms (social media, gaming environments)	Online environments are natural spaces for early psychosocial intervention
5. Prevention	Parent education, school awareness, digital literacy	Prevention should integrate schools, families, and community actors to build digital resilience

health – manifesting in attention problems, imitation of risky behaviours, and exposure to suicide-related content: “It’s especially reflected in their behaviour – problems with attention, communication, and adopting negative behavioural patterns from high-risk groups.”

Loneliness, loss of closeness, poor family relationships, and substance use were most often cited as causes of suicidal behaviour.

#### 2. *Online threats*

Most-mentioned risks included loneliness, digital isolation, cyberbullying, addictions, suicidal communities, online challenges, and family problems. Workers also observed that online communication feels safer and more anonymous: “Yes, in the online environment, communication is safer and anonymous.”

Respondents stressed that online spaces allow professionals to reach youth in their natural digital settings.

#### 3. *Readiness for online interventions*

Most respondents agreed that current readiness for online intervention is insufficient: “No.” (in response to the question whether social workers are adequately prepared.)

They recommended additional training and structured opportunities for digital communication with adolescents.

#### 4. *Digital support*

All social workers welcomed expanding their presence on platforms used by youth (e.g., social networks, Discord, gaming platforms) as an effective means of early intervention.

#### 5. *Prevention*

Participants called for more awareness campaigns in schools, parent education, and open discussions on tech-

nology use and safe digital behaviour: “Give this topic more space in schools, raise awareness among parents.” “We should open a discussion on when it is safe to give children a phone and how to use digital media safely.”

## Discussion

### **Discussion of the quantitative research findings**

The mixed-methods design enabled a comparison of statistical trends with the real-life experiences of social workers. Together, the findings reveal a nuanced picture of adolescents’ digital behaviour and psychosocial well-being. To strengthen analytical interpretation, quantitative and qualitative results were compared and integrated. The mixed-methods approach revealed how statistical patterns correspond with real-life experiences described by social workers.

The results of the quantitative part of the study reveal a complex and multilayered relationship between time spent in the digital environment, the experience of loneliness, and young people’s attitudes toward digital forms of mental health support. Although it was hypothesized that longer time spent online would be directly associated with increased feelings of loneliness, the data did not confirm this assumption. On the contrary, some results suggest that in the digital space, loneliness is less about quantity and more about the quality of online interactions.

#### *1. Lack of correlation between time online and loneliness*

A key finding is that the number of hours spent online is not a predictor of loneliness. This contradicts parts of the literature

that emphasize the negative impact of excessive technology use (Keles et al., 2020), but aligns with studies that highlight the difference between passive and active internet use. Active communication with close contacts can reduce feelings of isolation, while passive content consumption (e.g., social comparison) may deepen it.

### 2. *Random exposure to suicidal content*

The finding that there is no significant relationship between searching for mental health information and exposure to suicidal content highlights the role of online algorithms. Suicide-related content can appear without deliberate searching, which poses a challenge for platforms that should be responsible for moderating sensitive content. This underscores the need to strengthen young people's digital literacy so they can critically evaluate displayed content and avoid internalizing it. The absence of association between seeking mental-health information and encountering suicidal content underscores the algorithmic nature of risk exposure, raising ethical questions about platform responsibility and the need for stronger media literacy.

### 3. *Gender differences in experiencing loneliness*

Although the observed gender difference in loneliness did not reach statistical significance, the trend suggests that women may more frequently experience loneliness during online activity. This is supported by other research pointing to women's greater sensitivity to the quality of relationships and increased social comparison on networks (Nesi and Prinstein, 2015). These differences should be taken into account when designing preventive interventions. Although not statistically significant, the trend of greater loneliness among girls aligns with literature on social comparison and emotional sensitivity. Prevention programs should account for gender-specific vulnerability.

### 4. *Trust in online help and willingness to seek support*

An interesting finding is that subjective trust in online forms of support (e.g., chat with a social worker) does not automatically translate into a greater willingness to seek help. This paradox reveals the presence of other barriers, such as stigma, preference for face-to-face contact, or lack of awareness of available support options. Thus, promoting mental health in the online space must involve not only technical solutions but also addressing young people's attitudes and perceptions. Adolescents who trust online support are not necessarily more willing to seek it. Stigma, fear of disclosure, and a preference for in-person contact remain major barriers, highlighting the need for destigmatization and the promotion of safe, credible, online help channels.

### 5. *Cyberbullying and trust in professional support*

The finding that experience with cyberbullying does not affect the sense of safety in using online help is important for building trust in digital services. It suggests that young people can distinguish between harmful content in casual online interactions and structured professional support, which they perceive as safe and trustworthy. Adolescents differentiate between peer-based harm and professional digital support, showing that structured, moderated online spaces can still be perceived as safe.

### 6. *Strong support for professionals in online spaces*

The most significant finding is the strong correlation between experienced loneliness and support for the presence of pro-

professionals in digital environments. This result confirms that loneliness is not only a condition but also a motivator for seeking accessible and meaningful support. For professionals (e.g., psychologists and social workers), this represents a challenge to be present where young people are; in the online space, which is no longer just a leisure activity but an integral part of their social reality. The strongest quantitative link – between loneliness and endorsement of professionals online – is consistent with qualitative findings. Both data sets confirm that lonely adolescents desire accessible professional guidance in digital spaces.

The findings of the quantitative study emphasize the need for a differentiated approach to youth in digital environments, considering gender differences, psychological needs, and motivations for seeking help. The loneliness of young people is not merely a consequence of excessive technology use but more often stems from a lack of authentic connection and understanding – both online and offline. The development of digital support services should not be viewed as an alternative to in-person help but as an essential extension and complement, aligned with the evolving communication needs of the new generation.

## **Discussion of the qualitative research findings**

The findings from the qualitative part of the study highlight the complex and growing influence of the digital environment on youth mental health, as well as the challenges faced by social workers in providing interventions in this specific context. This discussion reflects on the findings in light of relevant literature and opens space for professional and systemic recommendations.

### 1. *The digital environment as a risk factor*

The results confirm that the digital environment – especially social networks and forums – can act as a trigger or amplifier of mental health problems among young people. This aligns with the work of authors such as Twenge and Campbell (2010), who point to correlations between excessive use of digital technologies and increased levels of anxiety and depression in adolescents.

Respondents noted that young people often imitate behaviours seen in online communities, including suicidal behaviour, and are vulnerable to the normalization of such themes in digital discourse. In this regard, it is essential to emphasize the need for regulation of algorithmic recommendations involving sensitive content, as well as for media literacy education among youth. Social workers feel underprepared to respond to digital distress signals, echoing findings by Reamer (2013). Systematic education, supervision, and institutional support are needed to integrate digital competencies into professional training. This corresponds with Špánik's (2017) observation that in social work – a field whose mission is to ensure an acceptable quality of life for clients – delaying decisions increases the likelihood of harmful consequences for the individual.

### 2. *Insufficient preparedness for intervention*

Practitioners repeatedly emphasized that current education and practice in social work are not keeping pace with the dynamics of digital threats. There is not only a lack of specific skills, but also of methodological and legislative support for online forms of intervention. This finding is supported by studies (Naslund et al., 2016) that call for the structural integration of digital competencies into social work curricula.

### 3. Supporting digital social work

Findings show that professionals themselves view the digital space as a potential tool for effective support, provided that adequate conditions are in place. Online platforms could enable social workers to establish earlier contact with vulnerable youth – often before the onset of severe symptoms.

However, this form of work requires new ethical frameworks, technological infrastructure, and clear standards for providing online help. As the NASW (2021) warns, the digitalization of support services must not compromise quality, safety, or professional accountability. A clear advantage of this emerging form of social work practice is that, despite the risks of virtual reality, it can still rely on the standard methodology of social work, which Štefáková (2016, p. 21) defines as “a set of methods, techniques, rules, and procedures, along with their interconnections, continuity, and application in practical social work”.

### 4. Challenges and directions for prevention

There was strong agreement among respondents regarding the importance of prevention. It is evident that schools and parents play a key role in creating a safe digital environment. This view is supported by the WHO (2021), which states that community-based suicide prevention is most effective when it involves families, schools, and local authorities.

Opening discussions about digital hygiene, appropriate age for entering the online world, and young people’s ability to regulate their digital behaviour should be part of educational programs from the earliest levels of schooling.

The results point to an urgent need for systemic changes in education, legislation, and professional support for social workers in digital settings. Young people need a guide in the online world, and social workers are in a unique position to fulfill that role safely and professionally.

### **Practical recommendations based on theoretical and empirical analysis**

Based on the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative parts of the study, several key recommendations can be formulated to improve the prevention of loneliness, support youth mental health, and develop digital forms of social work.

#### 1. Strengthen the online presence of mental health professionals (social workers, psychologists)

The strong support for the online presence of professionals from both young people and social workers indicates the need to create specialized digital counselling platforms (e.g., chat-based or anonymous services) where young people can safely communicate about their concerns. It is recommended to:

- Increase the presence of social workers on platforms commonly used by youth, especially social media and community forums.
- Create a formal “digital counsellor” role, with clearly defined competencies, work methodology, and ethical guidelines.

#### 2. Introduce systematic education for professionals about online risks

Social workers’ responses revealed that current education does not adequately address the challenges of the digital age. It is recommended to:

- Integrate modules on digital literacy, cyberbullying, suicidal communities, and algorithmic content exposure into social work and psychology study programs.

- Provide training on online intervention, risk detection on social media, and communication in anonymous environments.
- Develop practical handbooks for online intervention that can be used by school psychologists, teachers, and prevention specialists.

#### 3. Focus on the quality of online interactions, not just time spent online

Although empirical data did not confirm that more time online directly correlates with loneliness, young people should be taught to distinguish between passive and active digital behaviour. Passive content consumption without interaction is often linked to negative emotional states. Recommendations include:

- Campaigns promoting healthy digital habits, emotional self-regulation, and self-management in the digital world, not just screen time reduction.

#### 4. Promote digital prevention in school and community settings

Social workers emphasized that prevention should begin in schools. Based on this:

- Increase the number of mental health and online risk prevention programs in secondary schools and universities.
- Create educational programs for parents to help them understand their children’s behaviour in the digital world.
- Encourage discussions on technological parenting, such as: “When is it safe to give a child a smartphone?” “How do we foster critical thinking in the online space?”

#### 5. Build trust in online forms of support

While many young people perceive online help as safe, not all are willing to use it. Recommendations include:

- Promote real-life stories of successful online support, which may reduce stigma and build trust in digital services.
- Create a centralized, accessible directory of online counselling and support services with options for anonymous contact.

#### 6. Monitor emerging digital phenomena and conduct longitudinal research

Due to the rapid evolution of digital platforms, it is essential to:

- Continuously monitor new digital trends (e.g., suicide challenges, algorithmic amplification of mental distress).
- Conduct longitudinal studies to track the development of loneliness, mental health, and digital behaviour over time.
- Most importantly, to connect research with practice by creating platforms for knowledge exchange between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

By combining both data sets, the study demonstrates that the statistical trends observed (e.g., loneliness as a predictor of support for professional presence online) are fully consistent with the narratives of social workers describing youths’ need for accessible online guidance. Digital practice in social work must balance innovation with ethical responsibility. Professionals need guidance to navigate dilemmas of privacy, informed consent, and algorithmic influence on vulnerable users. Future research should explore long-term outcomes of online interventions and develop evidence-based standards for safe, inclusive, and ethically sound digital social work.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that adolescent suicidal behaviour cannot be interpreted solely through individual or biomedical determinants. It is a multifactorial psychosocial phenomenon influenced by a wide range of social, relational, and environmental variables – among which the digital environment plays an increasingly formative role.

The quantitative results demonstrated that loneliness is not directly associated with the amount of time spent online but rather with the quality of digital interactions and individual differences in coping, resilience, and social connectedness. Moreover, the data revealed a strong demand for the visible presence of mental health professionals in online spaces, particularly among lonely and vulnerable adolescents.

The qualitative analysis provided deeper insight into the perceptions of social workers, revealing not only their awareness of emerging digital risks but also their insufficient preparedness for direct intervention in online environments. Despite this limitation, participants expressed a high level of motivation to engage in digital support activities, provided that they receive appropriate training, ethical guidance, and methodological tools. As several respondents noted, structured and continuous digital engagement could enhance communication efficiency, foster early intervention, and reduce the risk of avoidance or procrastination in both the professional and the client.

In light of these findings, there is an urgent need to reconceptualize the traditional paradigm of social work and to institutionalize digital social work as a legitimate and necessary extension of practice. The online world is no longer a parallel reality – it is an integral component of everyday life, encompassing adolescents' communication, emotions, crises, and help-seeking behaviours.

To respond effectively, social work must be present where young people actually live their experiences – both offline and online.

### Statement on informed consent and use of artificial intelligence

The authors confirm that all parts of this manuscript were prepared manually. No automated content-generation tools were used in the development of research results or interpretation. AI-based software (e.g., grammar or style checkers) served solely for linguistic and editorial refinement, in full compliance with ethical and academic integrity standards.

### Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## References

- Bauman Z (2003). *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 176 p.
- Durkheim E (2007). *On Suicide*. Trans. Simpson G. London: Penguin Classics, 480 p.
- Frankl VE (2018). *A přesto říci životu ano: psycholog prožívá koncentrační tábor*. 5th ed. Praha: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 192 p.
- John A, Glendenning AC, Marchant A, Montgomery P, Stewart A, Wood S, et al. (2018). Self-Harm, Suicidal Behaviours, and Cyberbullying in Children and Young People: Systematic Review. *J Med Internet Res* 20(4): e129. DOI: 10.2196/jmir.9044.
- Joiner T (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 276 p.
- Keles B, McCrae N, Grealish A (2020). A systematic review: the influence of social media on depression, anxiety, and psychological distress in adolescents. *Int J Adolesc Youth* 25(1): 79–93. DOI: 10.1080/02673843.2019.1590851.
- Kocourková J, Koutek J (2017). Posttraumatická stresová porucha u dětí a dospívajících. *Česká a slovenská psychiatrie: časopis České psychiatrické společnosti ČLS JEP a Psychiatrické společnosti SLS* 113(3): 128–131.
- Koutek J, Kocourková J (2007). *Sebevražedné chování*. 2nd ed. Praha: Portál, 128 p.
- Lajčin D, Porubčanová D (2021). Team work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Emerg Sci J* 5(Special Issue): 1–10. DOI: 10.28991/esj-2021-SPER-01.
- Liu X, Huang J, Yu NX, Li Q, Zhu T (2020). Mediation Effect of Suicide-Related Social Media Use Behaviors on the Association Between Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempt: Cross-Sectional Questionnaire Study. *J Med Internet Res* 22(4): e14940. DOI: 10.2196/14940.
- Mishna F, Sanders JE, Daciuk J, Milne E, Fantus S, Bogo M, et al. (2022). #socialwork: An International Study Examining Social Workers' Use of Information and Communication Technology. *Br J Soc Work* 52(2): 850–871. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcab066.
- Naslund JA, Aschbrenner KA, Marsch LA, Bartels SJ (2016). The future of mental health care: peer-to-peer support and social media. *Epidemiol Psychiatr Sci* 25(2): 113–22. DOI: 10.1017/S2045796015001067.
- NASW – National Association of Social Workers (2021). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, DC: NASW Press. [online] [cit. 2025-09-08]. Available from: <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- NCZI – National Health Information Centre (2024). *Samovraždy a samovražedné pokusy v SR 2023*. [online] [cit. 2025-09-08]. Available from: <https://www.nczisk.sk/Aktuality/Pages/Samovrazdy-a-samovrazedne-pokusy-v-Slovenskej-republike-v-roku-2023.aspx>
- Nesi J, Prinstein MJ (2015). Using Social Media for Social Comparison and Feedback-Seeking: Gender and Popularity Moderate Associations with Depressive Symptoms. *J Abnorm Child Psychol* 43(8): 1427–1438. DOI: 10.1007/s10802-015-0020-0.
- O'Reilly M, Dogra N, Whiteman N, Hughes J, Eruyar S, Reilly P (2018). Is social media bad for mental health and wellbeing? Exploring the perspectives of adolescents. *Clin Child Psychol Psychiatry* 23(4): 601–613. DOI: 10.1177/1359104518775154.
- Patchin JW, Hinduja S (2012). *Cyberbullying prevention and response: Expert perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 224 p.
- Pierzak D, Bursová J (2024). Wpływ środowiska i otoczenia na zdrowie i życie współczesnych seniorów. In: Levická J, Orlíková M, Vaceková M (Eds). *Životné prostredie ako priestor pre spoluprácu*. Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, pp. 30–39. [online] [cit. 2026-01-12]. Available from: [https://fsvucm.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Zivotne-prostredie-ako-priestor\\_F.pdf](https://fsvucm.sk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Zivotne-prostredie-ako-priestor_F.pdf)
- Porubčanová D, Bursová J, Valko M, Bartoš P (2024). Perception of university social responsibility through the eyes of students: Comparative analysis of values, organisational efficiency, and educational process in Slovak universities. *J Infrac Policy Dev* 8(12): 8786. DOI: 10.24294/jipd.v8i12.8786.
- Reamer FG (2013). Social work in a digital age: ethical and risk management challenges. *Soc Work* 58(2): 163–172. DOI: 10.1093/sw/swt003.
- Španík M (2017). Manažment v sociálnej práci. In: Štefáková L, et al. *Metódy a metodika sociálnej práce III: Manažérske postupy, plánovanie a metódy v sociálnej práci*. Ružomberok: Verbum, pp. 13–36.
- Špatenková N, et al. (2017). *Krize a krizová intervence*. Praha: Grada, 288 p.

- 
23. Štefáková L (2016). Terminologické vymedzenie metód a metodiky sociálnej práce. In: Štefáková L, Hulínová V, et al. *Metódy a metodika sociálnej práce I*. Ružomberok: Verbum, 259 p.
  24. Twenge JM, Campbell WK (2010). *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement*. Atria Books, 368 p.
  25. WHO (2021). *Suicide worldwide in 2019: Global health estimates*. © WHO. [online] [cit. 2025-10-10]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026643>
  26. Zapletal L, Porubčanová D, Dolinská E, Tamášová V, Jankovičová A (2022). Factors of secondary socialization of children from home education. *AD ALTA: J Interdiscip Res* 12(2): 204–209. DOI: 10.33543/1202204209.