The Experiences of Volunteer Counsellors Providing Crisis Intervention through Social Media: '*I know I'm just a stranger on the internet'*

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Abstract

The internet offers new ways to engage young people with counselling support during periods of crisis. There is, however, much to learn about how best to use this resource and to train counsellors to work effectively in an online space. This qualitative study explores how volunteer counsellors at an Instagram based crisis service experienced their work, training, and supervision.

Fifteen volunteer counsellors at the online crisis service were interviewed to explore their experiences of online work. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify key themes in the data relating to strategies for dealing with the opportunities and challenges of online work, the emotional experience of online counselling, and recommendations for supervision and training.

The analysis suggested that there are unique opportunities and challenges to working online that required the active use of creative strategies, including managing a lack of visual and verbal cues; identifying disingenuous service users; utilising text language effectively, managing suicide risk; controlling the pace of conversations; gaining information from service users' Instagram feeds; and using an informal peer support approach. The analysis also drew attention to significant emotional impacts on volunteer counsellors including the stress of managing suicide risk and seeing graphic images online, identifying too closely with their clients, and frustration at the limitations of brief online interactions. Despite the challenges of working online, volunteer counsellors identified benefits such as the life-enriching impacts of their work. In the area of supervision and training, online counselling was seen to offer and require unique training approaches, including learning about youth culture and digital communication. Ongoing support and connection were also seen as essential to being able to continue this work.

This research has important implications for those developing or working in online crisis counselling services. It highlights the practical and emotional challenges of this work, but also shows how volunteer counsellors' own expertise and knowledge can overcome these challenges to use this space effectively to reach young people in distress. The research calls attention to the need to provide adequate support for volunteer counsellors working in this area.

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CONTENTS

THESIS OVERVIEW AND RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

Youth mental health and suicidality are concerning global health and social issues (Hawke et al., 2019; McGorry & Mei, 2020). As young people of the current generation have grown up in the digital age of the internet and social media, they are immersed in a new and developing communication culture, and their needs and expectations for mental health support have changed (Gibson, 2021; Ito et al., 2009). Formal mental health services are working to meet the evolving expectations and needs of young people by using digital platforms that are familiar, flexible, and comfortable for youth (Bailey et al., 2020; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Hanley, Sefi, Grauberg, Prescott, & Etchebarne, 2021; Robinson et al., 2020). Some of these services, particularly online helplines, rely on the work of volunteer counsellors to provide free and accessible support to young people (Gilat, Tobin, & Shahar, 2012; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). To date, we know little about how volunteer counsellors negotiate this online terrain and how they experience and make sense of their work.

In this study, I analysed the experiences of volunteer counsellors working for a novel, 'proactive' online crisis intervention service, where service providers make the initial contact with potential service users to offer brief intervention using social media. Volunteers primarily staff these services, which brings a distinctive set of challenges such as the need for specific training, supervision, and managing the emotional burden on volunteers (Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). While the focus of previous research has been on understanding whether and how these social media interventions might work (Rice et al., 2016; Rickwood et al., 2019), less is known about the subjective experiences and training needs of those who provide such services. This research sought to explore the emotional experiences of volunteer counsellors undertaking this work and provide potential implications for future service development and training.

Volunteer counsellors working for a New Zealand-based organisation, Zeal Education Trust's online crisis intervention project, Live for Tomorrow Chat (LFT Chat) were the focus of the present study. LFT Chat is an online intervention service, which uses Instagram, an international web-based photo- and video-sharing application that allows users to watch and share pictures and short videos (Arendt, Scherr, & Romer, 2019), to reach out to young people whose posts suggest suicidal ideation and high levels of distress. The current models of mental health service delivery are reactive rather than proactive, and often have long waiting lists that are unable to meet the needs of young people in the moment that they need it (McGorry, Purcell, Hickie, & Jorm, 2007; Summerhurst, Wammes, Wrath, & Osuch, 2017). Given this service gap, LFT Chat aims to meet young people, in a medium they are comfortable with, to offer peer-support assistance to help reduce their emotional distress during times of crisis. At the time of the study, LFT Chat used a social listening tool to search for hashtags (words preceded by the # symbol) containing keywords indicating that the person who posted them may be in crisis, for example, #depressed, #suicide. Volunteer counsellors then contacted Instagram user accounts assessed to be at a high potential of suicidal ideation, by private direct message, to offer support (Live for Tomorrow, 2019). If accepted by the user, this contact developed into a short episode of crisis counselling conducted via direct message. At the time of the study, LFT Chat had 30 active volunteers.

In order to understand how the volunteers experienced and made sense of their work in this novel terrain, I conducted interviews with 15 volunteer counsellors from LFT Chat. I analysed the data using reflexive thematic analysis to explore the various skills and strategies they used to provide this service via Instagram, their emotional experiences of this work, and their supervision and training needs.

A key consideration when using reflexive thematic analysis is the subjectivity of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Watt, 2007). As the researcher is the primary instrument of

data collection and analysis in qualitative research, reflexivity is deemed essential (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Russell & Kelly, 2002; Watt, 2007). In this study, I acknowledged the constructive role I took in the process, therefore making my own values, beliefs, and practices visible. I considered how these values, beliefs, and practices shaped my research motivations and methods, with a view to increase the rigour of this study.

My psychology education and previous experience training and working as a volunteer telephone helpline counsellor influenced my theoretical motivations and subjectivity as a researcher. My interest in psychology and volunteer counselling stemmed from my own experience as a young person, where I struggled to support friends who were experiencing mental health difficulties and distress. While I did not experience mental health difficulties myself, I noticed that teachers, parents, and school counsellors did not always understand the struggles of young people, and my friends and I found ourselves wishing that there were other places to turn to for support. My friends and I began to utilise telephone helplines and found that this was a useful place to gain information, support, and advice, without the stressors of involving parents or school staff. It is from this perspective that I conducted this research, as I was curious about how things might have changed for young people, including differences from what I had experienced. I realised that the landscape of young people had shifted since I was that age, with digital technology becoming a much more important part of their world and how they reach out for help.

My work and training as a volunteer counsellor were formative experiences for me, providing my first opportunity to engage with young people in a therapeutic space and put my learnings from University into action. These experiences solidified my interest in mental health and further motivated me to pursue a career as a clinical psychologist. My academic experience and training as a clinical psychologist provided me with knowledge and expertise in relation to supporting young people's personal development and psychological wellbeing. While I was

familiar with social media and Instagram, I was unfamiliar with the way it might change the needs of volunteer counsellors working on this platform.

This thesis is comprised of four chapters. In chapter one I review the literature relevant to my research focussing on youth mental health and suicidality, support services using digital platforms to meet the changing needs of young people, and understanding the particular experiences and training needs of volunteer counsellors working for these services. In chapter two, I discuss the theoretical and methodological approaches taken to the study. In chapter three, I provide an overview of the findings of the study. Finally, in chapter four I discuss the main findings of this research, its potential implications, strengths and limitations, and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to situate the present research in its broader social context and the existing body of related literature. First, I discuss the important concern of youth mental health and suicidality. I then consider barriers for young people in engaging with formal support services, with a specific emphasis on the growing need to improve and adapt crisis intervention and suicide support services for this population. I explore the internet and social media as important sites of crisis intervention, as well as the development of online counselling for young people. I draw comparisons between digital and non-digital volunteer counselling experiences, skills, and support and training needs, to consider whether there are unique challenges that need consideration when preparing volunteers to work in this new field. Finally, I outline the aims of the present study and the specific research questions developed.

Mental Health and Suicidality in Young People

The United Nations classifies 'youth' as a period of development between 15 to 24 years of age (Hawke et al., 2019). This period is considered to be a peak stage for the emergence of mental health challenges, with approximately three-quarters of all lifetime mental health disorders developing by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2007; McGorry, Trethowan, & Rickwood, 2019; Prescott, Hanley, & Ujhelyi, 2017). In New Zealand, youth mental health is considered to be in a state of 'crisis', with an estimated one third of young people experiencing a mental health issue during a 12-month period (Clark et al., 2013; Oakley Browne, Elisabeth Wells, Scott, Mcgee, & Team, 2006). International youth mental illness prevalence rates are reported to be one in five; with figures suggesting rates of mental health diagnoses for young people are increasing worldwide (Jozefiak et al., 2016; Malla et al., 2019; Navarro, Sheffield, Edirippulige, & Bambling, 2020). Mental health challenges account for nearly half of the overall burden of disease between 10 and 24 years of age, making it the leading cause of disability for this age group (Mei et al., 2020).

Among young people, suicide is of particular concern, and a relevant global public health threat, being the second-leading cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds internationally according to recent World Health Organisation estimates (World Health Organisation, 2018). Suicide rates in young people have markedly increased in several high-income countries over the last decade (Bould, Mars, Moran, Biddle, & Gunnell, 2019; Ruch et al., 2019). In England and Wales, for example, rates almost doubled in the age group of 15-19 between 2010 and 2017 (Padmanathan, Bould, Winstone, Moran, & Gunnell, 2020). Alarmingly, current statistics indicate that New Zealand has the highest youth suicide rate of all 34 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Ministry of Social Development, 2019). New Zealand's youth suicide rate in 2016 was 16.8 deaths per 100,000 residents (Ministry of Social Development, 2019). Non-fatal deliberate self-harm is also prevalent in the New Zealand youth population, with researchers reporting that approximately 20% of young people had engaged in self-harm (Coppersmith, Nada-Raja, & Beautrais, 2017). On an international level, researchers using meta-analyses found that the aggregate lifetime and 12-month prevalence of non-suicidal self-injury for young people was 22.1% globally (Lim et al., 2019). Researchers conducted a similar study within seven European countries, reporting an average 12-month prevalence estimate for youth of 11.5% for deliberate self-harm behaviours (Muehlenkamp, Claes, Havertape, & Plener, 2012). Canadian researchers using a cross-sectional study showed that rates of deliberate self-harm related visits to emergency departments by young people rose by 135% between 2009 and 2017 (Gardener et al., 2019). The above findings highlight the concerning issue of suicide and self-harm for young people and the need for adequate intervention in this area.

There are a variety of views on why young people might be particularly vulnerable to mental health difficulties and suicide. Predominant psychological theories emphasise what have been considered universal changes and demands for youth (Arnett, 2007; Erikson, 1965).

These theories highlight the biological and cognitive changes that occur for young people, such as height and weight increases, sexual maturation, and structural and connectivity changes in the brain (Carr, 2013; Erikson, 1965; Piaget, 2003). Developmental theorists argue that physical and cognitive maturation involves an amplified intensity in emotional experience, new opportunities for intimate relationships, and a developing sense of symbolic and abstract thinking, allowing for new ways of interpreting the world (Erikson, 1965; Graber, Nichols, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010; Piaget, 2003). Young people may begin to embark on 'adult' activities including developing egalitarian relationships with their parents, employment seeking, and intimate relationships, which require the development of new social skills (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Psychologically, young people may begin to develop autonomy and identity in areas such as gender, sexual orientation, goals, values, and strengths (Bradford & Rickwood, 2014; Erikson, 1965). The convergence of these experiences is theorised to contextualise the mental health landscape of young people (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Sagen, & Holgersen, 2011).

Dominant psychological and developmental theories have tended to focus attention on individual factors and changes that occur between adolescence and adulthood, paying less attention to the way youth mental health is shaped by social and cultural factors. For example, the interpersonal theory of suicidal behaviour proposes that suicide risk is increased by the concurrent presence of two interpersonal constructs—thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness (and hopelessness about these states) (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). While this theory references the impact of social relationships, it emphasises individual experiences of these and how this personal vulnerability increases the risk of suicide (Stubbing & Gibson, 2019). An alternate body of thought conceptualises youth as a social generation, situating young people within a particular context, with political, economic, and social conditions influencing the construction of their experience (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011; White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017; Woodman & Bennett, 2015). Social generation theorists

highlight the social conditions creating unique opportunities and challenges for young people, acknowledging both varied individual experiences as well as collective, generational perspectives (Furlong et al., 2011; Woodman & Bennett, 2015). These theorists suggest that increasing social uncertainty, globalisation, and the rapid changes of choice and technology are placing distinctive demands on young people in contemporary society (Gluckman, 2017; White et al., 2017).

Young people now spend longer periods in education, thus suspending entry into full-time employment and the adoption of 'adult' roles (Arnett, 2007; Woodman & Bennett, 2015). Extended and non-linear transitions into adulthood likely contribute to the mental health difficulties of young people (Furlong et al., 2011). While there is increased flexibility in employment, there is a pattern of social inequality in Western societies (France & Threadgold, 2015; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Poverty and social disadvantage are associated with the development of mental health problems for youth, with certain groups such as indigenous people, minority groups, and refugees facing particular disadvantages (Lucassen, Clark, Moselen, Robinson, & Group, 2014; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007).

Culture and ethnicity are important factors influencing the mental health of young people (Furlong et al., 2011). In an environment of increased complexity, young people can take on multiple, possibly conflicting identities, and the active construction of identity is likely more complex for young people who identify as indigenous or ethnic minorities (Josselson & Harway, 2012; Paradies, 2016). International researchers suggest that ethnic and cultural minorities have higher rates of mental health difficulties, with evidence that this can be accounted for by colonisation, marginalisation, racism, and economic and social disadvantage (Johnson, Rostila, Svensson, & Engström, 2017; Manuela & Sibley, 2014; Wallace, Nazroo, & Bécares, 2016). These researchers highlight the need for services to acknowledge the social context in which youth experience mental health difficulties and distress.

Individualisation and fragmentation of traditional social structures have also likely caused an increase in uncertainty, responsibilities, opportunities, and choices for young people (Furlong et al., 2011; Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005; White et al., 2017). In contemporary Western countries, young people appear to be exposed to contradictory pressures, where individual responsibility and autonomy are emphasised, yet young people are simultaneously constrained by institutions controlled by adults (Gibson, Cartwright, Kerrisk, Campbell, & Seymour, 2016). Individualisation has resulted in a pressure for youth to take an active role in constructing their lives within an increasing context of uncertainty (Bauman, 1998; Beck, Lash, & Wynne, 1992; White et al., 2017). Theorists argue that as collective identities and predetermined belonging erode, individualisation has left young people searching for connection (Furlong et al., 2011; Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005).

The revolution of the internet to society has brought additional dimensions to the youth to adult transition, which is incomparable to previous generations (Laliberte & Varcoe, 2020). Evolving communication technology has created increased opportunities and expectations for young people, while also highlighting tensions between the desire for self-expression and concerns about privacy (Finn, Garner, & Wilson, 2011). Smartphones and social media have changed the way youth communicate and access information (Abi-Jaoude, Naylor, & Pignatiello, 2020; Lauricella, Cingel, Blackwell, Wartella, & Conway, 2014). This new environment of communication has created pressures for young people, including the need to present an acceptable online identity, with social media interaction serving as a barometer of social acceptability or failure, as well as benefits including increased access to information and connection to diverse communities (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Hanley & Wyatt, 2021).

In summary, as youth represents a period of high risk for mental health problems and suicide, it requires the development of support services that can recognise and incorporate the

specific challenges of culture and contemporary life. The rapidly changing social context, with a developing culture of individualism, inequality, technology, and self-responsibility has likely placed new pressures on young people. The suicide risks, suffering, and exposure to the stigma associated with mental health problems for young people highlight the need to address this issue (Summerhurst et al., 2017).

Youth Engagement with Formal Support Services

Despite having the highest incidence and prevalence of mental health difficulties, 12–25-year-olds have the poorest service access, highlighting the immense gap between the need for and engagement with mental health services among young people (McGorry, Bates, & Birchwood, 2013; McGorry et al., 2022; Sweeney, Donovan, March, & Forbes, 2019). Researchers have conducted international surveys reporting that up to 82% of young people experiencing distress do not approach or engage with mental health services (McGorry et al., 2013; Nearchou et al., 2018). For example, researchers in Australia found that only 56% of young people who reported experiencing mental health problems had sought help for these (Lawrence et al., 2015). This gap between need and engagement with services has been referred to as a crisis in care, as the majority of young people with mental health difficulties have not had their needs met (McGorry et al., 2022; McGorry, Purcell, Goldstone, & Amminger, 2011; Stubbing & Gibson, 2021).

For the small number of young people who choose to engage with formal support services, a large amount withdraw their engagement. Researchers have found that for young people who were able to access mental health care services, an estimated 30%−75% discontinued treatment early, with dropout rates comparatively higher than for other age groups (Baruch, Vrouva, & Fearon, 2009; De Haan, Boon, de Jong, Hoeve, & Vermeiren, 2013; Sweeney et al., 2019). For example, researchers reported that 45% of the young people engaged in Headspace, Australia's National Youth Mental Health Foundation, had discontinued therapy

before session three (Schleider, Dobias, Sung, & Mullarkey, 2020). Compared with young people who complete treatment, those who withdraw are more likely to have ongoing difficulties and are less likely to seek help again (Schleider et al., 2020). Treatment discontinuation and service underutilisation by young people are significant concerns because untreated mental health difficulties have been shown to persist into adulthood, with harmful effects on education, employment, and psychosocial functioning (Corry & Leavey, 2017; Sweeney et al., 2019). These findings again highlight the gap between need and engagement in mental health services for young people.

To summarise, youth mental health and suicidality are concerning global health and social issues. Alarmingly, there is a trend of service underutilisation and early treatment withdrawal by young people, highlighting the need for researchers to explore new services working to meet the contemporary needs of young people. It is imperative for services to understand and find creative ways to address service underutilisation by young people to provide appropriate and effective care to this vulnerable population.

Barriers to Service Utilisation

Several factors contribute to poor mental health service access among young people. These include service inaccessibility, the stigma and shame associated with mental health difficulties and suicide, a lack of autonomy for youth in their engagement with mental health services, and young people's belief that such services are irrelevant to their needs. These barriers highlight the need for mental health services to adapt to the needs of youth in order to provide effective intervention.

A critical barrier for young people seeking help is service inaccessibility. Practical features of mental health services that can prevent young people from accessing care include cost, hours of operation, inaccessible location, and inconsistent or confusing services (Anderson, Howarth, Vainre, Jones, & Humphrey, 2017; Settipani et al., 2019; Stubbing &

Gibson, 2021). Child and adolescent services are overwhelmed with long waitlists and high demand, with an estimated additional four young people in need of services for each one who engages (McGorry & Mei, 2020). Researchers have identified long waiting times and inflexibility of services among key barriers to service utilisation by young people (Anderson et al., 2017). The absence of timely access to treatment has been noted, with additional issues such as appointments being changed or scheduled during school hours affecting youth engagement (Persson, Hagquist, & Michelson, 2017; Settipani et al., 2019). Young people have described a lack of awareness of existing services, and limited understanding of pathways to access appropriate care, suggesting that information about services is not provided by means accessible to youth (Anderson et al., 2017; Navarro, Bambling, Sheffield, & Edirippulige, 2019; Summerhurst et al., 2017). As well as practical barriers, access to services can also depend on young people perceiving services as being welcoming to them, as mental health services can signal formality, coldness, and authority (Gibson, 2021). The issue of inaccessibility affecting young people's engagement with mental health services highlights the need for such services to provide more flexible, timely, and accessible care. For example, there is potential for digital support to reach young people more immediately and in environments where they are most comfortable.

Another barrier to service engagement by young people is the shame and stigma associated with mental health problems and suicidality. Young people have described concerns about confidentiality and fears that their difficulties would be revealed to others as barriers to service engagement (Binder et al., 2011; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). Researchers have conducted systematic reviews identifying stigma as a key barrier to formal help seeking for young people, a disproportionately larger barrier in comparison to adults (Gulliver et al., 2010; Nearchou et al., 2018). Higher self-stigmatisation has also been related to lower help-seeking behaviour for young people (Bradford & Rickwood, 2014). In several studies, young

people have associated suicidality with failure, weakness, and selfishness, and expressed negative views about suicide as a form of manipulative attention seeking by their peers (Molock et al., 2007; Roen, Scourfield, & McDermott, 2008). Internalisation of such stigmatising discourses about mental health and suicidality is argued to be particularly harmful to young people, at a stage where identity may be under development (Evans, 2007). The shame and stigma associated with mental health service engagement by young people underline the need and value of more anonymous and confidential services for this population.

Autonomy and the ability to exercise agency are critical social and developmental issues for young people (Mei et al., 2020). Threats to young people's agency and autonomy can be a major obstacle to them engaging with mental health services (Binder et al., 2011; Gulliver et al., 2010; Malla et al., 2019; Raviv, Raviv, Vago-Gefen, & Fink, 2009). Researchers have shown that young people strongly value agency and choice in their treatment (Gibson et al., 2016; Lavis, 2011). For example, several qualitative researchers have identified that young people value space for their autonomy to be respected and strengthened in therapy (Binder et al., 2011; Gibson, 2021). When compared to a similar study conducted with adult service users, participants did not describe the need for autonomy in the therapeutic relationship so often (Binder, Holgersen, & Nielsen, 2009). It is important for mental health services to create spaces in which young people feel empowered, can exercise autonomy, and make their own choices (Gibson, 2021). Online services, where service users can withdraw and engage at their own volition, might be especially helpful to young people in overcoming their fear of losing autonomy by engaging with mental health services.

A further barrier to young people's willingness to engage with mental health services is that they are less likely to use services they perceive as irrelevant to them (Summerhurst et al., 2017). Young people have reported beliefs that mental health services are not appropriate for them, as they are typically designed by adults who do not understand or cannot help them

with their difficulties (Cosgrave et al., 2008; Coughlan et al., 2013; Gibson, Wilson, Grice, & Seymour, 2019; Shilubane et al., 2014; Summerhurst et al., 2017). Researchers have shown that young people perceive formal support service providers as judgemental, unhelpful, and out of touch with youth problems (Chan et al., 2017; Corry & Leavey, 2017). For example, young people have reported a belief they do not understand their problems in ways that match with professional views (Gibson et al., 2016; Stubbing & Gibson, 2021). These findings highlight a concerning gap between the attitudes of adults and young people regarding mental health knowledge and discussion (Gibson et al., 2019; Shilubane et al., 2014). To address this gap, transformative change is required to create services that are empowering, inclusive, responsive, creative, and youth-friendly (Coughlan et al., 2013; McGorry et al., 2013; Stubbing & Gibson, 2021).

As discussed, barriers to service engagement by young people include inaccessibility and inflexibility of services, concerns about stigma, confidentiality, and doubts about the utility of formal support. As youth mental health services do not appear to meet the needs of this population, it may be that these services were not developed with young people's perspectives in mind.

What Young People Want From Support Services

To address the various barriers to formal support service utilisation identified by young people, it is important to understand what they do want from such services (Gibson, 2021; Stubbing & Gibson, 2021). Young people have reported a desire for collaborative, casual, and flexible support services, including a preference for peer support and digital communication (Dyson et al., 2016; Gibson, 2021).

Young people have identified relationships with service providers as central to their engagement with mental health services (Gibson, 2021). Researchers have found that young people value the therapeutic relationship above other various factors such as the form of

therapy used (Binder et al., 2011; Everall & Paulson, 2002). Youth have reported looking for trust, authenticity, and relatability in service providers, and for therapists to be non-judgemental, empathetic, and caring (Binder et al., 2011; Gibson, 2021). Given the lack of power young people typically experience in relation to service providers, they have reported a desire to have an equal relationship over which they can exercise control (Binder et al., 2011; Freake, Barley, & Kent, 2007; Gibson et al., 2016). While young people have reported looking for characteristics in a clinician that they would want in a friendship, they also reported valuing the addition of professionalism, which provides assurance regarding safety and confidentiality given the stigma associated with help seeking (Gibson, 2021). It is important for mental health and crisis support services to acknowledge the criticality of relationships in young people's lives and to recognise that they are more likely to engage with such services in the context of relationships they value (Stubbing & Gibson, 2021).

Given the importance young people place on equal, balanced relationships, peer support is likely an appealing alternative to engagement with formal mental health services. There is evidence to suggest that young people prefer to utilise informal support sources when in distress, such as peers, rather than formal support services (Naslund, Aschbrenner, Marsch, & Bartels, 2016). For example, researchers using a survey found that young people reported a clear preference for seeking help from peers rather than formal supports (Lawrence et al., 2015). Seeking help from informal sources is likely perceived as carrying a lower psychological cost and posing less threat to young people's autonomy (Chinman et al., 2014; Raviv et al., 2009). In addition, seeking help from peers is likely perceived as a normative behaviour whereas utilising formal psychological support may be perceived as stigmatic (Nearchou et al., 2018; Raviv et al., 2009). These findings indicate the need for more informal, peer support driven mental health services for young people to increase their engagement.

Many of young people's peer relationships play out in their online networks and they have reported using these to talk about distress and to get support from others (Hanley, Prescott, & Gomez, 2019; Nasier, Gibson, & Trnka, 2021; Prescott et al., 2017; Prescott, Rathbone, & Hanley, 2020). Young people have described online forums as supportive environments where they felt able to interact to share helpful advice and ask questions, making them feel less alone and more connected to others (Prescott et al., 2017; Prescott et al., 2020). The anonymity of digital communication has shown to reduce anxieties around social judgement and facilitate the more open discussion of sensitive topics (Callahan & Inckle, 2012; Gibson et al., 2016; Gibson & Trnka, 2020). There may be a disinhibition effect online, whereby the anonymity and confidentiality of the internet allow for freer communication due to the reduced threat of stigma (Bradford & Rickwood, 2014; Prescott et al., 2017). Online peer support has been reported to reduce isolation and provide coping strategies and a sense of hope for youth in distress (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Naslund et al., 2016). Researchers have used observational studies to document online peer support in the form of encouragement, and young people have reported using social media to form bonds with each other through the discussion of emotional issues (Alvarez-Jimenez, Gleeson, Rice, Gonzalez-Blanch, & Bendall, 2016; Dyson et al., 2016; Marchant et al., 2017). Importantly, this ability for young people to discuss mental health issues online might facilitate offline sharing, underlining the potential for using online support as a gateway to developing better offline support (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). It is crucial for mental health services to accommodate young people's preference for flexible, peer-driven online communication.

As well as informal online peer support, young people have reported a preference for formal support services in the digital space (Navarro et al., 2019). Developments in technology and smartphones have enabled more fluidity and immediacy in communication, which has likely changed young people's expectations for support services (Gibson, 2021). Online

support services remove many of the physical barriers that traditional therapy can encounter, allowing young people to exercise self-reliance and autonomy more freely (Bradford & Rickwood, 2014; Hanley & Wyatt, 2021). As agency and choice have been identified as important factors for youth, services with the opportunity to disengage then re-engage, for example by logging off the internet, may also be more appropriate for this population (Gibson, 2021). Young people have reported feeling more in control of the conversation with online counsellors due to the reflective period of reading and responding online (Fang, Tarshis, McInroy, & Mishna, 2018; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Haxell, 2015). Researchers have found that young people value receiving therapy in real-time, remaining in control, not involving their parents, and expressing themselves freely (Harper, Dickson, & Bramwell, 2014; Krause, Midgley, Edbrooke-Childs, & Wolpert, 2020). Young people have also reported forming strong therapeutic alliances online, finding online counselling safer than face to face counselling, as they feel less exposed, confronted and stigmatised (Hanley, 2012). These findings underline the importance of offering mental health services online, a space where young people are likely more comfortable (Navarro et al., 2019). As young people are 'digital natives', the expectation that therapeutic support is provided online will likely continue to grow (Hanley & Wyatt, 2021).

To summarise, young people have emphasised the importance they place on therapeutic relationships, and have reported valuing non-judgemental, caring, and equal relationships with mental health service providers. Young people have also reported a preference for informal, flexible and peer-led supports. It is likely that as communication has moved online for many young people, their expectations of support services have changed and the need to provide support through this medium has intensified.

The Internet and Social Media are Important Sites of Intervention

Due to the constant availability, geographical scope, anonymity, and interactivity of the internet and social media, the need and potential for providing psychological support to young people through these platforms has grown (Dinh, Farrugia, O'Neill, Vandoninck, & Velicu, 2016; Frederikson, Shepherd, Te Maro, & Hetrick, 2021). Many contemporary support and crisis intervention services are currently working to meet young people's needs on the internet and social media (Dyson et al., 2016; Hanley et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, web-based psychological support became an increasingly important resource for individuals within countries that were placed in enforced lockdown periods (Hanley et al., 2021). While raising important ethical considerations, these services have the potential to decrease stigma and provide real-time support and crisis intervention in a space more comfortable and accessible for young people (Coppersmith et al., 2017; Frederikson et al., 2021; King-White, Kurt, & Seck, 2019).

Internet usage is ubiquitous among youth, with over 90% of young people in developed countries using the internet daily, and representing one-quarter of internet users worldwide (Bailey, Rice, Robinson, Nedeljkovic, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2018; Thorn et al., 2020). Social media has become an essential part of young people's lives, with social networking becoming the most common online activity in the past ten years (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Madden et al., 2013). As this generation of youth has grown up with 24-hour online access to communication, they have likely developed skills in textual and image-based communication and may also feel more comfortable communicating through those mediums (Liu et al., 2019; Turkle, 2017).

The internet and social media have emerged as important forums through which young people can express distress and suicidality, by providing isolated youth with opportunities for communication (Ali & Gibson, 2019; Jacob, Evans, & Scourfield, 2017). Young people have reported utilising the internet and social media to seek help and make disclosures when experiencing emotional distress or suicidal thoughts (Alvarez-Jimenez et al., 2016; Hanley et

al., 2019; Jacob et al., 2017; Singleton, Abeles, & Smith, 2016). Youth at risk of suicide have been found to use social media more frequently and for longer periods than those not at risk, and use social media to disclose their mental health and suicidality status (Cash, Thelwall, Peck, Ferrell, & Bridge, 2013; Marchant et al., 2017). For example, researchers have found significant associations between the frequency of suicide-related posts on social media and suicide rates in both the United States and Korea (Jashinsky et al., 2014; Won et al., 2013). The use of temporary social media accounts, which provide a further degree of anonymity, are commonly used by young people to make suicidal disclosures online (Arendt, 2018; Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017). These temporary accounts allow users to express views about highly sensitive topics, such as suicidality, with greater disinhibition (Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017). Major social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr have implemented bans on content involving suicidality and self-harm, however, these restrictions continue to be circumvented by users, for example by using increasingly ambiguous search terms and misspellings (Dyson et al., 2016; Miguel et al., 2017). As social media provides an outlet for young people to express distress and suicidality, this platform has been identified as useful for targeted support provision in this area (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Ziebland & Wyke, 2012).

While social media has provided an opportunity for distressed young people to connect with one another and seek support, there are some risks involved, which formal support services can help to address. Researchers argue that there are risks associated with online disclosures of distress, including cyberbullying, obtaining poor quality information, and contagion (Dyson et al., 2016; Robinson, Rodrigues, Fisher, & Herrman, 2014). Explicit depiction of self-injury on social media is common, as shown by recent site content studies (Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Arendt et al., 2019). However, researchers have also shown that suicidal self-disclosure online can provide access to education and resources, and generate

valuable conversations for young people (Dyson et al., 2016; Prescott et al., 2017; Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017). Researchers have found that online mental health communities can provide users with increased self-efficacy and encourage further support seeking in a professional capacity (Prescott et al., 2020). For example, a systematic review of social media use to discuss self-harm and suicide found that numerous beneficial suggestions were shared among social media users, such as ideas for formal treatment and advice on how to stop self-harming behaviour (Dyson et al., 2016). Guidelines for clear protocols and ethical standards for suicide prevention activities using social media platforms are under development, in Europe, Australia, and the United States (Dinh et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2020). For example, the "#chatsafe" social media campaign was developed in Australia to generate guidelines for young people to facilitate safe peer-to-peer communication about suicide online (Robinson et al., 2020). While these guidelines will help young people to respond more appropriately to expressions of suicide online, there are likely to be situations in which peer support is insufficient and formal support services are required.

In response to the surge in social media and internet usage by young people, several purpose-built moderated websites, and social networks for suicide prevention have been developed to target young people in distress (Bailey et al., 2018; Frederikson et al., 2021; Lopez-Castroman et al., 2020). These purpose-built websites and services can include informative content, gamified interventions, web-based question and answer sessions, online forums, standalone therapeutic programmes or apps, and web-based contact with professionals (Christie et al., 2019; Ersahin & Hanley, 2017; Hanley et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2019). Such services use popular social media platforms to advertise to users and are interactive, enabling users to give and receive peer support, as well as access and share information while being moderated by volunteers and professionals (McGorry et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2016). These platforms seek to improve the social connectedness and clinical outcomes for young people

through a combination of moderator and self-directed evidence-based therapy content and social networking, using interactive newsfeeds where users can post and comment (Farrer, Christensen, Griffiths, & Mackinnon, 2011; Greidanus & Everall, 2010; Rice et al., 2016). Kooth, for example, is a free web-based therapy and support service for children and young people in the United Kingdom, where service users remain anonymous and can tailor the support they receive, choosing between direct contact with professionals or accessing psychoeducational articles and online forums (Hanley et al., 2021). Closed social networking platforms have also been developed, such as "Re-Frame IT" and "Rebound", to provide evidence-based interventions to youth experiencing suicidality (Rice et al., 2016). These services include self or moderator-guided content, and users can interact with moderators intermittently (Bailey et al., 2018).

With an increasing number of these online interventions aimed at young people, it is important to establish their effectiveness in reducing suicidality. There is some existing research describing the potential efficacy of social media and online interventions for targeting depressive symptoms and suicidality in young people (Rice et al., 2016; Salehi, Salehi, Mosadeghi-Nik, Sargeant, & Fatehi, 2020). For example, researchers found significant and reliable improvements for young people on self-report outcomes including suicidal ideation following an eight week period using the online social networking intervention "Affinity" (Bailey et al., 2020). Text-based online hotlines, staffed by volunteers, have also shown to be effective in providing support to youth experiencing suicidal ideation, with studies reflecting self-reported decreased distress by services users (Dinh et al., 2016; Finn et al., 2011; Salehi et al., 2020). Young people have reported that text-based online counselling services have helped them to overcome isolation, and increased their confidence in discussing issues contributing to distress (Salehi et al., 2020).

The immediacy of social media creates potential for services to intervene in instances of suicidal disclosures, using status update posts, user-generated content, or targeted direct messages (Liu et al., 2019). Social media interventions can reach out proactively to otherwise inaccessible populations to provide suicide interventions and offer counselling (Robinson et al., 2016). For example, qualitative researchers reported a successful informal intervention in a suicide attempt following the disclosure of suicidal intent by a Twitter service user, highlighting the possibility for formal support services to utilise this opportunity to work proactively (Cash et al., 2013). Proactive Suicide Prevention Online (PSPO), developed in China, uses social media to combine proactive identification of suicide-prone individuals with specialised crisis management in the form of emotional and informational support (Liu et al., 2019). Using a comparison study of the frequency of word usage in service users' microblog posts one month before and after consultation with PSPO, researchers reported preliminary findings that the frequency of death-oriented words significantly declined while the frequency of future-oriented words significantly increased (Liu et al., 2019).

While there may be potential to use social media support to prevent suicide, these interventions also raise several important ethical issues (King-White et al., 2019). Significant considerations in offering any form of online psychological support to vulnerable groups include confidentiality and data protection, respect for the autonomy and dignity of the service users, valid consent processes, and access to follow-up care (Hanley et al., 2021; Phelps et al., 2017). The developing field of algorithms and suicide detection programmes raises a question about the trade-off between privacy and suicide prevention (Coppersmith et al., 2017). Critics have raised the concern about the limited capacity of counsellors to determine a client's capacity to consent without the use of verbal and non-verbal cues (Harris & Birnbaum, 2015). Privacy and security are important concerns when handling and managing health-related data, as service users may be concerned about where their information goes, how it is stored, and

who it is shared with (Hollis et al., 2017). Online counsellors must convey adequate information to service users so that they can decide about whether to proceed (Bolton, 2017). Some online services purposefully offer anonymity to users, with a view to provide the much-needed support that would most likely not have been accessed without the option of anonymity (Hanley et al., 2021). Transparent privacy policies regarding the collection and usage of user data are ethically integral to the design and implementation of services working through social media (Valentine et al., 2019).

In summary, considering the surge in internet and social media usage for youth, the need for mental health interventions using these platforms has grown. Young people have reported a preference for informal, anonymous, and readily available supports. Social media is uniquely placed to meet these needs, and innovative, proactive services are under development in this field, such as PSPO and LFT Chat. While there are important ethical considerations, and further research is required to demonstrate their efficacy and evaluate their functionality, interventions using social media can reach a large number of young people, providing anonymous yet accessible and flexible support. These services can reduce stigma, increase social connectedness, and reduce the capability to enact suicide or self-harm through real-time monitoring, information provision, and proactive interventions.

The Experience of Volunteer Counselling Online

In order to provide free of charge and 24-hour services, proactive social media crisis interventions such as LFT Chat typically rely on the work of volunteer counsellors (Gilat & Rosenau, 2011; Gould et al., 2016). A small but developing body of research has examined the experiences and perspectives of those providing text-based online counselling in its various forms (Bambling, King, Reid, & Wegner, 2008; Harrison & Wright, 2020; Navarro et al., 2020; Salleh, Hamzah, Nordin, Ghavifekr, & Joorabchi, 2015). Online counsellors have reported that their work differs from face-to-face practice, with the digital environment presenting

distinctive challenges, opportunities, and experiences (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014). These studies have focused on professionally trained, qualified counsellors working online, rather than volunteer counsellors who have considerably less training and supervision. Understanding the emotional experiences and specific needs of volunteer counsellors working online is crucial in the development and sustainability of social media-based crisis intervention services that must recruit, train and support these volunteers.

The small number of studies available in online counselling have highlighted some advantages that qualified counsellors perceive in this mode of working. Social media allows for both synchronous (immediate) and asynchronous (delayed) communication to be used interchangeably, providing counsellors and service users the chance to process, edit and respond to messages, as well as conscious consideration of information offered (Greidanus & Everall, 2010; Hanley et al., 2021; Singleton et al., 2016). Online counsellors have reported valuing the advantages of text-based communication in processing, planning, and reviewing messages before sending them, which can allow a greater sense of control over the pace of conversations (Gatti, Brivio, & Calciano, 2016). In addition, the opportunity to re-read messages after a conversation has offered the counsellors moments of reflection different from those obtained during the session (Gatti et al., 2016). Both counsellors and service users have reported a greater ease in articulating their ideas in text-based online counselling compared to verbal communication and the better ability to organise their thoughts in sessions (Navarro et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2020).

Online counsellors have also reported that a key benefit of the online environment is emotional safety, due to reduced emotional proximity to the client (Harrison & Wright, 2020). Researchers have described the view of online counsellors that therapeutic relationships can feel safer when working online rather than face to face (Bambling et al., 2008; Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Hanley, Ersahin, Sefi, & Hebron, 2017). Counsellors have reported

experiencing lower emotional intensity when interacting with service users online in comparison to telephone counselling due to the lack of verbal input (Bambling et al., 2008). These findings align with young people also reporting a sense of emotional safety online, due to reduced emotional proximity to the counsellor (Navarro et al., 2019). Researchers have suggested that the online environment frees up young people to more easily discuss sensitive issues and be assertive with counsellors (Ospina-Pinillos et al., 2018; Wong, Bonn, Tam, & Wong, 2018). This reduced proximity to service providers and the potential levelling of power differentials are likely particularly appealing to young people given their preference for autonomy (Gibson, 2021). The above findings highlight how both service providers and young service users experience a sense of emotional safety in a text-based online environment.

While there are advantages to working online, research does however suggest that there may be some challenges for counsellors working in this new terrain. A critical challenge reported by text-based online counsellors is minimising the risk of misinterpretation and misunderstandings (King et al., 2006; Mallen, Jenkins, Vogel, & Day, 2011). Whilst nonverbal cues are absent in telephone communication, preventing the evaluation of facial expressions and body language, the conversations can still follow verbal cues (Coman, Burrows, & Evans, 2001; Haxell, 2015). In an online or instant message setting, there is an additional absence of verbal cues and further risks of misinterpretation and misrepresentation, which can create difficulty in assessing the emotional state of service users (Callahan & Inckle, 2012; Robinson et al., 2016). Moreover, counsellors have reported that service users can misunderstand the use of active listening or empathic statements as patronising (Navarro et al., 2020). Researchers have argued that as online communication lacks the social cues that are present in face-to-face or telephone exchanges, online counsellors may also interpret messages based on their own understandings (Greidanus & Everall, 2010). To mitigate this challenge, online counsellors have reported placing a greater emphasis on word choice and correct spelling (Harrad & Banks,

2016; Navarro et al., 2020). Online counsellors have also reported that careful exploring of emotions and issues and asking the client for feedback can reduce the risk of miscommunications (Bambling et al., 2008; Harrison & Wright, 2020). As these findings reflect the impressions and techniques of trained, qualified counsellors, it would be useful to examine those of volunteer counsellors working online. Further research is required to establish techniques that might be used for addressing a lack of verbal and visual cues and miscommunications for online volunteer counsellors.

Volunteer counsellors working online must be alert to the range of ways that young people might express distress and emotion using social media. Youth have reported that distress is not typically expressed overtly on social media and that it requires reading subtle hints, such as the use of humour, or changes in the person's habitual style and content of communicating (Gibson, 2021; Gibson & Trnka, 2020). Textual and image-based communication make up the largest part of young people's social media interaction, enabling them to express themselves distinctively but fluently in 'textspeak' (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Nasier et al., 2021). Online counsellors are required to understand the style and interpret the emotion of text-based communication by young people as they have developed their own language on the internet (Poh Li, Jaladin, & Abdullah, 2013). Various emotional nuances, undertones, and facial expressions can be conveyed or interpreted by using "smileys", emoticons, and other commonly used symbols (Gatti et al., 2016; Nasier et al., 2021; Poh Li et al., 2013). Online counsellors have reported using symbols or brief phrases frequently to aid emotional expression and have emphasised the importance of using authentic language characteristic of their usual communication style (Bambling et al., 2008; Paterson, Laajala, & Lehtelä, 2019). These findings raise questions about how volunteer counsellors experience this distinctive online emotional communication, and how they could be trained to interpret and utilise it in their work.

Despite the imposed brevity of text-based messages, online volunteer counsellors are required to demonstrate openness, warmth, genuineness and empathy (Bradford & Rickwood, 2014). Online counsellors have reported concerns about communicating appropriate empathic understanding online (Harrison & Wright, 2020). Researchers have shown that online counsellors prioritise processes that gather information and build rapport, such as asking open-ended questions, providing approval and encouragement, using empathic statements, and paraphrasing to clarify client issues (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014). Online counsellors have reported that messages need to be specifically typed to convey understanding or emotional responses (i.e. sadness, grief, excitement), whereas in face-to-face sessions they could use nonverbal communication (Harrison & Wright, 2020; Navarro et al., 2020). The need to convey affirmation and support more overtly in a text-based medium than in face-to-face communication, where facial expression and 'minimal encouragers' can be relied upon, has also been noted in the field of youth research (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). Further research is required to explore the strategies and techniques volunteer counsellors might use to convey empathy using this medium.

Volunteer counsellors are required to engage quickly with their clients and deliver interventions effectively in a short amount of time (Hsu, Lin, Sun, & Chen, 2017). In an online setting, several factors exacerbate the challenges of doing these tasks. The slow speed of text exchange has been reported by online counsellors to limit their ability to complete interventions (Bambling et al., 2008; Dowling & Rickwood, 2014). Online counsellors have reported that delayed responses from service users and loss of continuity made it difficult for them to feel engaged in the counselling process, leading to feelings of inefficiency and disconnectedness (Bambling et al., 2008; Dowling & Rickwood, 2014). In this context, it can be difficult for online counsellors to feel that their interventions have been successful (Kit, Teo, Tan, & Park, 2017). The ability of online service users to disengage and re-engage without warning has been

noted as a source of reported anxiety for online counsellors (Harrad & Banks, 2016; Harrison & Wright, 2020). Experiencing being "cut off" has been described by online counsellors as eliciting feelings of failure (Harrison & Wright, 2020). This sense of failure may be heightened for online volunteer counsellors who may have only a one-off interaction with a given service user and have considerably less training in coping with uncertain outcomes (Navarro et al., 2020).

While the anonymity of the digital environment is appealing to young service users, it can present challenges to volunteer counsellors providing crisis intervention online (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017). Online counsellors have reported struggling to verify the identity of online service users, which is particularly challenging in cases of threatened harm to self or others (Bolton, 2017; Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Finn et al., 2011). Working knowledge of suicide risk assessment models, including identifying suicidal desire, intent, capability, protective factors, and developing safety plans are crucial skills required of volunteer counsellors (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014). Acknowledging and responding to all suicide signs expressed by service users has been shown to be effective at ensuring optimal responses to suicidal presentation (Hunt, Wilson, Caputi, Wilson, & Woodward, 2018b). The decrease in inhibition and increase in perceived control online may mean that service users can withhold information required for risk assessments (Harrad & Banks, 2016). Identifying individuals at imminent risk of suicide and intervening to secure their safety are critical tasks of crisis intervention services, and online counsellors may be less able to gather crucial information in a crisis than someone who can attend a potential emergency scene (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017; Krysinska & De Leo, 2007). Managing risk is likely more challenging for volunteer counsellors working in an online crisis intervention space, where service users are not required to provide any identifying information prior to an interaction. While telephone helplines can complete 'involuntary interventions' as a last resort, where phone numbers are tracked by the police and emergency

services deployed, the anonymity and international scope of some online interventions reduce the possibility and feasibility of using this option (Gould et al., 2016). In addition, making referrals to local mental health services poses a challenge for volunteer counsellors working in an online setting, as the location and identity of service users may not be revealed during an exchange (Hanley, 2012; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017). While existing research has highlighted the potential challenges of managing risk online, the emotional experience of this increased ambiguity and risk online for volunteer counsellors requires further exploration.

To summarise, there are distinctive benefits to online counselling, such as the ability to review and edit messages and a sense of greater emotional safety due to the anonymity of the online environment. There are also distinctive challenges, including the safety and risks involved with increased anonymity, conveying empathy, managing the absence of verbal and nonverbal cues, the use of colloquial language and symbols, time constraints, and potential technological difficulties. While these unique opportunities and challenges highlight the need for specific skill development, supervision, and training in this field, the existing research is limited, and reflects the impressions of trained, qualified counsellors rather than volunteers. Given the need for crisis intervention services to be staffed by volunteers, further research is required to explore the subjective experiences of volunteer counsellors who are working in this online environment.

Emotional Demands of Volunteer Counselling

While volunteer counselling has been shown to contribute positively to a sense of self and enable the construction of a pro-social identity, there are considerable emotional demands in this work (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Roche & Ogden, 2017). These demands include burnout, and vicarious traumatisation from managing suicide risk. Such emotional demands could intensify online, where service users may have different expectations than they would of a counselling situation and where the counsellors rely on text communication only.

Crisis workers are required to maintain empathy, make a connection, and manage the risk and emotional demands of a distressed and potentially suicidal person (Middleton, Gunn, Bassilios, & Pirkis, 2014; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). Volunteer counsellors, who typically have less training and experience than professional counsellors, deal with each service user on a short-term basis and do so under very high pressure (Hsu et al., 2017). This kind of emotionally intense volunteering is associated with high rates of burnout, which is defined in this context as a response to on-going emotional strain when dealing extensively with people in crisis (Smith, Callaghan, & Fellin, 2018). Researchers exploring psychological distress among volunteer counsellors have found significant levels of depression and burnout for this group (Hsu et al., 2017; Vawda, 2008). Burnout has been shown to affect the quality and effectiveness of voluntary services and can account for a high turnover rate of volunteers (Hsu et al., 2017). Fatigue and burnout can impair information processing accuracy and efficiency and consequently contribute to poor performance on decision-making tasks (Hunt, Wilson, Caputi, Wilson, & Woodward, 2018a). In addition, burnout and stress can be associated with difficulties in properly understanding the experiences of service users, and may impair decision-making and help-provision in crisis situations (Hunt et al., 2018a; Pompili et al., 2016). Given the negative impacts of burnout on volunteer counselling performances, it is important for crisis intervention services to understand the emotional support needs of their volunteers.

Volunteer counsellors managing suicide risk have reported a range of emotional reactions including anxiety, anger, sadness, frustration, powerlessness, and secondary traumatic stress reactions (Darden & Rutter, 2011; Fleet & Mintz, 2013; Sanders, Jacobson, & Ting, 2005). Helpline volunteers, in particular, have shown to be at risk of vicarious traumatisation and burnout due to unique features of helpline work such as the absence of non-verbal cues, clients ending calls without warning, and caller anonymity (Finn et al., 2011;

Middleton et al., 2014). Online counselling volunteers must work with the added lack of verbal cues and further risks of misinterpretation and misrepresentation, which likely increases the emotional burden (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008; Harrad & Banks, 2016). In a social media setting, there is also the potential for technical or internet connection difficulties, which could end conversations abruptly (Robinson et al., 2015). The disinhibition allowed by online communication may also subject volunteer counsellors to increased abuse by service users (Primack & Escobar-Viera, 2017). Online counsellors have reported feelings of helplessness engendered by the ambiguity of the online environment (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014). It would be useful to have more detail on the particular aspects of the experience that contribute to a sense of helplessness working online in order to understand how volunteer counsellors could be helped to manage this.

The onset and severity of burnout or vicarious trauma depend on various factors such as the counsellor's personal history of trauma and level of training and experience in the field (Howlett & Collins, 2014; Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Some of the difficulties experienced by volunteer counsellors have been found to relate to their reasons for volunteering, for example, their own or a family member's mental health difficulties (Mishara et al., 2016). Research has suggested that volunteer counsellors may bring with them unresolved life experiences that can both enhance and interfere with their counselling practice (Grafanaki, 2010; Rath, 2008). These findings highlight the need for adequate supervision and on-going support for volunteer counsellors. While previous research has examined the emotional demands of helpline and instant message counsellors, the particular demands of working in the context of social media remain unexplored (Taylor, Gregory, Feder, & Williamson, 2019).

In summary, there are considerable emotional demands to volunteer counselling, including the risk of burnout and vicarious traumatisation. Managing suicide risk has shown to be particularly stressful for helpline counsellors working with limited information and short-

term interactions with service users. These demands and stressors may be exacerbated in an online setting, with heightened ambiguity and limited ability for follow up, which highlights the need for sufficient supervision and training in this field to ensure that volunteer counsellors are supported.

Support Needs of Volunteer Counsellors

As crisis intervention services depend on the work of volunteer counsellors to function effectively, understanding and meeting the support needs of volunteer counsellors is crucial (Sundram, Corattur, Dong, & Zhong, 2018). Due to the emotional demands of this work, volunteer counselling services show high rates of turnover, which can be damaging for such services and their potential service users (Ramdianee, 2014). While positive social climates and supervision within organisations have been shown to increase volunteer retention and performance more generally, current research has not yet explored the specific support needs of volunteer counsellors working online.

It is well documented that in high-stress volunteer organisations, the impact of stress is mediated by levels of social support (Deslandes & Rogers, 2008; Howlett & Collins, 2014). Social interaction with other volunteers and a sense of teamwork have been identified as predictors of volunteer retention (Siegel & van Dolen, 2020; Willems et al., 2012). Researchers have reported that the most common reasons for dropping out provided by volunteer counsellors were poor management, boredom, or a conflict with other volunteers, and that job satisfaction was increased through positive relationships with other volunteers (Osborn, 2008). Researchers have also reported that the dominant strategy described by helpline counsellors for dealing with difficult service user interactions was to discuss these with other volunteers (Smith et al., 2018). These findings highlight the importance of organisations fostering positive relations between volunteer counsellors; however, how this could be achieved in an online environment is yet to be researched.

Supervision is an essential factor in supporting volunteer counsellors. Supervision facilitates the skill development of volunteer counsellors and contributes to the well-being of clients (Amanvermez, Zeren, Erus, & Buyruk Genc, 2020; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017). Regular supervision has been associated with improved professional development and increased self-confidence of volunteer counsellors (Harrad & Banks, 2016). Previous researchers have highlighted the value of adequate supervision in facilitating self-awareness and positive coping strategies by volunteer counsellors (Taylor et al., 2019). For example, researchers have found that a strong supervisory alliance was related to lower levels of vicarious traumatisation in volunteer counsellors (Schweitzer & Witham, 2018). Supervision that promotes effective strategies of self-care, support utilisation, resilience, and coping is essential preparation for volunteer counsellors (Durkan et al., 2019; Howlett & Collins, 2014).

The risk and ambiguity encountered within online counselling requires appropriate supervision that enables the counsellors to explore the nuances of online work and the challenges these can present (Harrison & Wright, 2020). As online volunteer counsellors will likely be exposed to highly distressed service users whom they do not have access to or contact information for, they require easily accessible supervision and high-quality support to prevent vicarious traumatisation (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017). A small body of research has examined the provision of supervision online by video chat (Amanvermez et al., 2020; Frank, Becker-Haimes, & Kendall, 2020). Practical advantages to online supervision include the convenience of time and location, and disadvantages include security risks and technical problems (Amanvermez et al., 2020). Despite these disadvantages, researchers have shown that counsellors who received online supervision have reported high satisfaction and indicated positive attitudes towards online supervision (Amanvermez et al., 2020; Kobak, Wolitzky-Taylor, Craske, & Rose, 2017). While the above findings indicate that

online supervision can be useful for trained counsellors, how it could work for volunteer counsellors with less formal training has yet to be explored in current research.

To conclude, positive interactions with fellow volunteers and paid staff have been shown to increase volunteer counsellors' motivation and job satisfaction. Researchers have highlighted the value of regular supervision in the skill development and self-confidence of volunteer counsellors. For volunteer counsellors working online, supervision, which can also be conducted online, is required to assist with the distinctive challenges of the digital environment and develop the skills required for working in this setting. Online volunteer counsellors' emotional experience of online supervision, and how a supportive social climate could be created for volunteers working online, are yet to be explored in current research.

Training Volunteer Counsellors

Due to the innovative and rapidly developing nature of online crisis intervention services, volunteer counsellors require specific, targeted training to undertake this novel work. The systematic training and supervision of volunteer counsellors have been shown to promote effective crisis intervention service functioning and increase volunteer counsellors' self-efficacy and service user outcomes (Hsu et al., 2017; Knight & Newby, 2019).

Following recruitment, volunteer counsellors typically begin training programmes focused on the development of basic counselling skills and self-management (Sundram et al., 2018). Motivations for volunteering and perspectives on counselling are often assessed before recruitment to ensure that volunteers can provide empathetic support and unconditional positive regard to callers, uninfluenced by their own personal, emotional, or psychological needs (Hunt et al., 2018b). Training typically includes a period of skill development, where supervisors offer feedback and observe the quality of work before the volunteers can provide counselling alone (Mishara et al., 2016; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). Volunteer counsellors often undergo training that includes learning the signs of suicide, attending to these signs,

engaging in direct questioning about the service user's suicidal state, and implementing procedures to ensure their safety (Hunt et al., 2018b; Knight & Newby, 2019). On-the-floor supervision is often available for real-time support (Hsu et al., 2017). Monthly supervision groups are typically provided, where volunteers can debrief, discuss challenging interactions and strategy use, however, attendance at these cannot be made mandatory due to the voluntary nature of these services (Haxell, 2015; Taylor & Furlonger, 2011).

Well-constructed training programmes provide orientations that acclimatise volunteers to the working environment, ongoing training to reiterate the service's values and provide updates on new policies and procedures, and teambuilding exercises to create cohesion between volunteers and paid staff (Jamison, 2003; Nencini, Romaioli, & Meneghini, 2016; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). Volunteer counselling services typically carry out training on a 'cascade' basis, with longer serving volunteers training new volunteers (Louw, 2017; Rath, 2008). Senior staff take responsibility for ensuring that relevant safety protocols are adhered to by volunteer counsellors (Rice et al., 2016). Volunteer counsellors have reported that initial training and both informal and formal ongoing supports help them in these roles (Siegel & van Dolen, 2020; Sundram et al., 2018). While research has shown how face to face and telephone volunteer counselling training works, training programmes for online work, and volunteers' subjective experiences of this training, requires further exploration.

It is well established that effective volunteer counselling training programmes can have benefits for the service, service users, and the community, including increased volunteer confidence, effective service provision, and reduced risks (Deslandes & Rogers, 2008; Dinh et al., 2016; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). The quality of counselling interventions by volunteers has been shown to increase with target-relevant training of sufficient duration (Rek & Dinger, 2016; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020). For example, in a recent study, 90 participants of the Youth Line volunteer initial training course completed the Suicide Intervention Response Inventory

(SIRI-2) before and after an eight-week training, showing a steady and significant increase in suicide intervention competencies (Skruibis, Astrauskas, & Mazulyte-Rasytine, 2019). Researchers examining the effect of targeted suicide intervention skills training within the United States National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network reported positive training effects on client symptoms (Gould et al., 2016). Researchers have also reported a positive correlation between training duration and supervisor ratings of active listening skills (Paukert, Stagner, & Hope, 2004). These findings underline the importance of adequate training for volunteer counsellors.

Researchers found that volunteer counsellor effectiveness correlated with level of experience, highlighting the need for crisis intervention services to retain experienced volunteers (Frank et al., 2020; Gould et al., 2016). For example, a survey of helpline service users found that volunteer knowledge and skills were strongly associated with user satisfaction of a crisis helpline (Finn et al., 2011). Increased experience likely leads to greater familiarity with and exposure to high-risk situations, which can, in turn, lead to more confidence in handling suicide risk and a wider range of intervention strategies (Gould, Kalafat, HarrisMunfakh, & Kleinman, 2007; Gould et al., 2016). Volunteer counsellors in their first year have reported quickly exhausting their limited repertoire of counselling skills and strategies, feeling unable to respond helpfully to clients that were experienced as difficult, or resistant to change (Armstrong, 2010). Moreover, researchers have found that crisis workers with less experience report more emotional discomfort managing suicide risk, and are more vulnerable to stress than experienced counsellors (Macleod, 2013; McNamara & Gillies, 2003). While the above findings highlight the importance of adequate training for volunteer counsellors and the need to retain experienced volunteers, the subjective experience and perceived training needs for online volunteer counselling require further research.

Some researchers have argued that a critical element of volunteer training is generating counselling self-efficacy – a counsellor's capacity to evaluate their ability and counselling effectiveness, which can influence counselling performance (Haberstroh et al., 2008; Hsu et al., 2017). Researchers have found that volunteers with higher counselling self-efficacy reported more confidence when encountering challenges, and stronger persistence when facing defeats in their work (Hsu et al., 2017). Those with lower self-efficacy reported less confidence, higher self-focus, and increased anxiety (Hsu et al., 2017). These findings are of importance to crisis intervention organisations, as the quality of training can influence volunteer counsellor's self-efficacy and performance (Hsu et al., 2017; Louw, 2017). As online counsellors have identified distinctive challenges of the digital environment and expressed concerns about how their interventions would be responded to in this setting, volunteer counsellors likely require more direct training in how to work in an online environment (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017; Mallen et al., 2011; Navarro et al., 2020).

In summary, the systematic training and supervision of volunteer counsellors have been shown to promote effective crisis intervention service functioning. Volunteer counsellors' self-efficacy and performance have been shown to improve with training, emphasising the need for quality training in this field. Given the distinctive challenges and opportunities presented by online work, volunteer counsellors require specific training for working in the online setting. In addition, as the length of experience is associated with increased performance, it is clear that there is a need for crisis intervention services to retain experienced volunteer counsellors. To date, research has not yet explored the subjective emotional experiences, training, and supervision needs of volunteer counsellors working for crisis intervention services using social media.

Implications of Literature for the Current Study

It is apparent from the literature reviewed above that youth is a period of high risk for mental health problems, suicide, and distress, however, this population has been shown to underutilise formal support services (Block & Greeno, 2011; Ospina-Pinillos et al., 2018). Service underutilisation and frequent dropout by young people suggest there is a need for developmentally appropriate support services that can incorporate the specific challenges and technology of modern life to meet the changing needs of young people (Gibson, 2020, 2021). The internet and social media represent a useful platform for crisis intervention, due to the convenience, low cost, scope, flexibility, confidentiality, and anonymity of this medium (Chan et al., 2017). Online and social media interventions may be uniquely suited to the needs of young people, by reducing the risk of stigma and providing easily accessible support on a 24-hour basis, in a less formal setting where young people have more control (Thorn et al., 2020). Researchers have shown a trend in young people seeking help online and disclosing suicidality using social media (Ali & Gibson; Hanley et al., 2019; Nasier et al., 2021). This trend highlights the opportunity for proactive interventions, such as LFT Chat, to make the first contact with potential service users online.

This research will help to develop an understanding of proactive online counselling services working to address youth mental health and suicidality by inserting themselves into a framework more suitable for young people. Volunteers primarily staff services such as LFT Chat, and there are likely unique challenges involved and skills required, for which volunteer counsellors must be trained and supervised. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of adequate training for volunteer counsellors in developing the necessary skills to support distressed service users (Armstrong, 2010; Hunt et al., 2018a). There are also likely significant emotional demands to this work, with crisis intervention services facing high rates of volunteer burnout and turnover (Dinh et al., 2016). While research is currently underway to determine the efficacy of crisis intervention services using social media (Bailey et al., 2018), the

distinctive challenges, emotional demands, training, and supervision needs of volunteer counsellors working on this platform remain unexplored. Investigating the emotional experiences, supervision, and training needs of volunteers who provide crisis intervention through social media, and the unique challenges and successes they encounter, will be valuable to maximise the potential of online crisis intervention services and ensure their sustainability.

Aims of the Current Study

This study investigated the experiences, training, and supervision needs of LFT Chat volunteers providing online crisis intervention to young people expressing suicidal ideation through social media. While the experiences of telephone and text counselling volunteers have been examined by previous research (Rek & Dinger, 2016; Siegel & van Dolen, 2020), it is essential to gain insight into the specific emotional experiences of volunteer counsellors working proactively using social media, and by exploring their experiences, identify any issues unique to working within this medium.

This study aimed to develop a clearer understanding of the experiences of online volunteer counsellors, and identify potential areas for future training services and development in this field. The study addressed the following three questions:

1. *What challenges and opportunities do online volunteer counsellors experience in their work and how do they deal with these?*
2. *What is their emotional experience of this work?*
3. *What are the training and supervision needs of volunteer counsellors working in this new field?*

In the following chapter, I outline the research approaches and processes that I used to conduct this study.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

As the focus of this study was on the experiences of online volunteer counsellors, it was important to use a methodology that allowed me to explore those experiences and the meanings that they might hold in context. For this reason, I selected an interview based qualitative approach. This chapter outlines my theoretical framework, reflexivity, the research setting, and methods of data collection, including the study design, participant demographics, recruitment, ethical considerations, and data gathering. I then describe the data analysis and discuss the issue of quality in qualitative research.

Theoretical Framework

To contextualise the subjective experiences of the participants, I used an interpretative epistemology and drew upon critical perspectives of youth for the current study.

Interpretative Approach

With the intention of understanding and promoting the perceptions and experiences of LFT Chat's volunteer counsellors, I used an interpretative epistemology, which assumes that all experiences are mediated subjectively through interpretation (Eatough & Smith, 2008). I chose to take an approach that would look at the experience of online volunteer counselling from the inside. An interpretative approach allowed me to explore how the participants made sense of their work from within their own experiences. This interpretative epistemology was particularly important given I was looking at the participants' observations and views as well as the emotional aspect of their experiences. I was also interested in exploring how the participants' meaning making is influenced by sociocultural and relational contexts, in particular the social media landscape they inhabit and work within (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Despite my own experience of having been a volunteer counsellor, I was aware of the gap between my own experiences and LFT Chat volunteers who were, largely

younger than I, and working in a digital world that was less familiar to me. I approached the participants with respect for their greater knowledge of youth digital cultures and connecting with young people in this space. Thus, I aimed to engage the volunteer counsellors in conversation about their work, training, and supervision, to gain understandings from their experiential expertise (Wyn & Harris, 2004).

Critical Perspectives of Youth

Aligned with critical theorists who challenge the more dominant, normative psychological theories about youth, I see youth as a multifaceted and varied process shaped by social and cultural context rather than biological development (White & Wyn, 2008). I view young people as social agents who negotiate social and cultural developments in active and distinctive ways (Arnett, 2002; White & Wyn, 2008). From this perspective, youth research balances power dynamics between young participants and adult researchers, adopting a lens of agency, rather than powerlessness, to understand the experiences of young people (Claveirole, 2004; Wyn & Harris, 2004). I recognised and prioritised the expertise that the participants, the majority of whom were young people, brought to this research and their work providing interventions for other young people within the developing landscape of technology, social media, and online crisis intervention services.

Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity refers to the specific values, experiences, and social contexts that a researcher brings to each aspect of the research process, which shape the research itself (Treharne & Riggs, 2014). Reflexivity involves careful consideration of the phenomenon under study, as well as how the researcher's own assumptions and behaviour may influence the inquiry (Watt, 2007). From this perspective, the data is seen as a collaborative and interactional process between the researcher and participants, who both bring their lived experiences and meaning to the research and together eventually shape the data that is produced (Braun &

Clarke, 2020). Moreover, it is argued that participant accounts are interpreted and analysed through the qualitative researcher's perspectives (Watt, 2007). To achieve researcher reflexivity, I acknowledged and reflected on the following relevant personal dynamics that may have influenced the research process (Silverman, 2016)**:**

First, my background as a volunteer telephone counsellor with a youth counselling service was a salient factor in the current study, for both the participants and myself. I have been through a training programme for providing crisis intervention and counselling in a volunteering space. As such, this was part of the introduction to each interview. I drew attention to my interest in how the experience of telephone counselling may differ from the proactive social media space of LFT Chat, and how supervision and training needs may be unique in this area. My own experience in volunteer counselling shaped the ways that I engaged with participants. In some respects, our common experiences may have enhanced rapport and contributed to mutual understanding. In other respects, my experience, which was not in virtual spaces, might have constrained my understanding and the questions I asked.

The second potential issue that influenced my perspective was my position as a doctoral candidate in the Clinical Psychology programme at The University of Auckland. As many volunteer counsellors are undergraduate psychology students, a number of them were likely to have goals to enter the programme. This dynamic put me in a position of power and expertise. I was aware that this dynamic might affect the accounts provided by participants, as they may have felt that some disclosures could affect their career aspirations. To reduce this power imbalance, I spent extra time building rapport and trust at the beginning of the interviews and emphasised my stance that the participants are the best experts of their own lived experiences. I also reiterated the confidentiality of the interview data. I used connection and adjusted my language in an attempt to create a collective, comfortable and informal environment (Wyn & Harris, 2004). By using this reflexive process, I worked to promote the perspectives of the

volunteer counsellors describing their own experiences. This approach enabled me to keep their needs and views at the centre of this research.

The Research Setting

Instagram is an online social networking application, created in 2010, with an estimated 100,000,000 unique monthly visitors (Mackson, Brochu, & Schneider, 2019). Creating new content on Instagram requires posting photos or videos, which can be beautified by filters (Kang & Wei, 2020). Instagram users have the option to comment upon and "like" other users' photos by tapping a heart icon, or communicate privately by direct message (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). It is common for people to keep public Instagram profiles, enabling users to "follow" and therefore view and comment on photos of people they do not know personally (Mackson et al., 2019). Following or being followed by strangers is also promoted by hashtags (words preceded by the # symbol) or labels used to caption photos, enabling photos with that hashtag to be searchable (Lup et al., 2015). In contrast to other social networking sites such as Facebook, where connecting with other users is reciprocal (both individuals receiving status updates on each other), following someone on Instagram may only go in one direction (Mackson et al., 2019). Instagram users can create two types of account to manage their self-presentation strategically, including primary accounts, where they highlight flattering aspects of themselves, or secondary, anonymous accounts, from which content such as expressions of distress are posted to the public (Arendt, 2018; Kang & Wei, 2020).

LFT Chat was developed in 2016 by Zeal Education Trust and was a recipient of a Vodafone Foundation New Zealand Technology Development Grant. LFT Chat is an online crisis intervention service, which uses Instagram to reach out to young people whose posts suggest suicidal ideation and high levels of distress. LFT Chat is a proactive outreach rather than a reactive service, distinct from helplines that wait for service users to call. To increase accessibility and flexibility, the volunteer counsellors completed their shifts from home, signed

into a communal ‘LFT Chat’ Instagram account from their personal computers or tablets provided by LFT Chat. The volunteer counsellors and shift supervisor would remain signed into a video chat to allow live communication throughout the shifts, which were two hours long between four pm and midnight (New Zealand time). At the time of the study, LFT Chat worked by searching hashtags on Instagram to search for keywords indicating that the person who posted them may be in crisis. Using a social listening tool (software that monitors and analyses online data), LFT Chat identified posts by publicly available user accounts as containing words indicative of distress, such as #depressed or #suicide. Shift supervisors would screen the posts identified by the social listening tool, and then select Instagram user accounts assessed to be at a high potential of suicidal ideation. Shift supervisors would send volunteer counsellors the selected Instagram posts through a text function of the video chat. The volunteer counsellors would then make contact with these accounts, by private direct message, to offer support. If accepted by the user, this contact developed into a short episode of crisis counselling conducted via direct message. The interventions took the form of interactive conversations, drawing from peer support and strength-based person-centred approaches to counselling (Live for Tomorrow, 2019). Service users could use the Instagram application from mobile phones or computers to direct message free to the service from anywhere in the world.

At the time of the current study, LFT Chat had 30 active volunteer counsellors. These volunteer counsellors were selected by an initial interview with a paid LFT Chat staff member. They received 30 hours of initial group training, provided in person by paid staff over two consecutive weekends at a rented venue. This training involved basic counselling skills training, developing self-care plans, team-building exercises, and role-plays. Following the 30 hours of initial training, the volunteer counsellors could begin working two-hour shifts. The volunteer counsellors were provided with live support from a supervisor when on shift, as well as monthly supervision groups using video chat. The volunteer counsellors were also supplied

with a Brief Intervention Training Participant Workbook, created by LFT Chat, which they could refer to while on shift.

According to Live for Tomorrow's 2019 annual report (Live for Tomorrow, 2019), conversations were conducted for a period of approximately 15-120 minutes and ended either when the conversation concluded as agreed upon by the service user and volunteer counsellor, or when there was no response from the service user for 30 minutes. Service users could reply hours or days later, receiving a response up until midnight, at which point their messages were held over to the next shift. As the counsellors worked in shifts, it was unlikely that service users would have the same counsellor if they continued to direct message on another occasion. Service users could also engage with more than one counsellor during a single 'session' if this extended over the end of a shift. Some continuity was maintained through counsellors having access to the direct message history as they are logged into one communal Instagram account. During the July 2018 to June 2019 financial year, LFT Chat's annual report reflects that 2316 young people were approached online by volunteers. A total of 815 conversations were conducted over 1386 volunteer hours completed. Service users based in 55 different countries engaged with the service, with a 46% response rate (Live for Tomorrow, 2019).

Methodology

I used an interview based qualitative approach for this study to explore the challenges and opportunities that LFT Chat volunteers experience in their work, the strategies they utilise, their emotional experiences, and their perceived training and supervision needs. I hoped to gain an understanding of how these volunteers made sense of their experiences within the digital context of social media (Longhofer & Floersch, 2014). Qualitative methods are well suited to facilitate the understanding of people's experiences within a specific setting, and to explore areas in which there is still much to learn (Maxwell, 2020).

I chose an interview based qualitative approach for this study because it enabled me to elicit first hand experiences of counsellors working in this new online environment, as qualitative research is useful for exploring subjective meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Patton, 2002). This method also allowed me to explore the way participants made sense of their experiences in the context of youth culture and broader experiences of the digital world, as qualitative research can be used to establish contextual meaning (Howitt, 2010). This approach provided the opportunity to find out about the emotional impact of the participants' work, and their understanding of the nature of the work in their own words, as qualitative research can access rich and deep accounts (Willig, 2013). Moreover, an interview based qualitative approach facilitated the exploration of new ideas in this relatively unknown and under-researched area. Importantly, this approach allowed me to draw on and learn from the knowledge of volunteer counsellors who have unique expertise in this new area, as qualitative research facilitates collaborative meaning making and empowerment of participants (Silverman, 2016).

Method

Recruitment

I began the process of recruitment by researching and contacting the managing director of LFT Chat's parent company, Zeal Education Trust, to enquire if they were interested in participating in the study. The managing director was supportive of this research, hoping to learn more about the training, supervision, and support needs of the organisation's volunteers. Following ethical approval and liaison with the managing director of Zeal Education Trust, I sent the company an advertisement for potential participants, an information sheet about the study, and a consent form to sign (Appendices A-C). Once these forms were signed and approved, participants were recruited from 10 past and 30 current volunteers of LFT Chat. Promotional materials for this study were sent by an LFT Chat team member to their emailing

list for past and current volunteers and were posted on their Facebook group. The advertisement asked potential participants to contact the researcher if they were interested in taking part in the study (Appendix A). Participants then contacted me by email and were provided the interview Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (Appendix D) and the interview Consent Form (CF) (Appendix E). I then contacted any interested participants by email to organise data gathering.

I took a purposive sampling strategy, appropriate to the small pool of volunteer counsellors working in this new field. Purposive sampling prioritises cases likely to provide valuable insights and rich information (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The unavoidable influence of volunteer bias in this sample is acknowledged, yet the self-selection of volunteers willing to recount their experiences in detail was critical for the explorative aims of the study.

Participants

A total of 15 volunteer counsellors, each with a varied length of experience volunteering with LFT Chat, participated in an individual semi-structured interview. Of the 15 participants, 14 identified as female, and one identified as male. The 15 volunteers ranged in age between 19 and 34 years, with the mean age being 20.2 years. Eight volunteers identified as Pākehā (New Zealand European), three as Chinese, one as Māori, one as Vietnamese, one as Spanish, and one as German. For confidentiality reasons, I used the first ethnicity identified by each participant for these totals. At the time of the interviews, one participant had left volunteer chat six months prior, and the remaining 14 were active volunteers. With regard to the length of involvement with LFT Chat, the volunteers' experience ranged between three months to 25 months. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic information of the participants

Demographic variable		Number of participants
Gender	Female	14
	Male	1
Mean age	20.2 years	
Mean length of time at LFT Chat	17.4 months	
Culture	Pākehā (NZ European)	8
	Māori	1
	Chinese	3
	Vietnamese	1
	Spanish	1
	German	1

Data Collection

Each participant was given a $50 gift certificate as koha (donation) for taking part in the study. The individual interviews were voice recorded in their entirety for verbatim transcription. Due to participant availability and preference, interviews took place either in private rooms at The University of Auckland or by Zoom or telephone. Participation by volunteer counsellors remained confidential from LFT Chat staff and volunteers.

Individual Interviews

All participants who volunteered to take part in the study were scheduled for an interview. Before the interviews commenced, I gave participants a consent form to sign. I informed participants that they could stop the interview at any time without giving a reason and could withdraw their data up to a month after the interview. All participants took part in a semi-structured interview, which lasted between 47.50 and 69.55 minutes (mean time 54.42).

As my research questions and theoretical approach emphasise the importance of understanding and empowering the perspectives of participants, I selected a data gathering method that allowed me to explore their subjective representations of their experiences. Semi-structured individual interviews were chosen for data collection as they allow in-depth, detailed, and personal explorations of experiences (Howitt, 2010). Individual interviews allowed participants to discuss the emotional, personal experience, and impact of their volunteer work, which they may not have felt comfortable expressing in a group setting (Stokes & Bergin, 2006). Semi-structured interviews use both predetermined and spontaneous questioning to explore the participant's perspective and ensure the research questions are addressed (Howitt, 2010). This format provided the structure of a formal interview balanced with the flexibility of an informal conversation, allowing for the development of rapport in the relationship (Willig, 2013).

In qualitative research, it is recommended that the point at which data saturation occurs should determine the number of interviews (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Data saturation refers to the stage when no new themes arise in participant responses (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). It has been suggested that when using thematic analysis, data saturation occurs within twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Given the interpretative, youth-focused approach to the study, I chose to complete all of the individual interviews requested by participants, regardless of saturation, as it was imperative to learn from each participant's experiential expertise.

The semi-structured interviews were organised around the participants' stories of their work as a volunteer counsellor for LFT Chat, and their experiences of training and supervision. Following introductions, each interview began with a question about what drew them to volunteer counselling (Appendix F). As participants shared their experiences, I asked questions to prompt more detail, provide clarity, and explore their perspectives. The role of a naïve

inquirer was adopted where possible to encourage participants to share detailed explanations (Willig, 2013). I reminded participants throughout the interview that they are the best experts of this work and their own experiences, to challenge the power dynamic and remind them that they were leading the interview (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). I used the interview questions as prompts, moving with the conversation led by the participant. If the discussion diverged from the focus of the study, I would ask similar open-ended questions to redirect the conversation.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for the study in July 2019 (reference 023252). The details of this approval were stated in the Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms for both the volunteer counsellors and the managing director of Zeal Education Trust (see Appendices).

I was mindful that participants might not have wanted LFT Chat staff to be aware of their participation in the study as it involved exploring their perceptions of training and supervision. I addressed this concern by requiring participants to contact me directly to express interest in the research, rather than eliciting contact through LFT Chat. As the pool of volunteers with LFT Chat is relatively small, and stories provided might be identifiable, Zeal's managing director provided an assurance, outlined in the Consent Forms and Participant Information Sheets, that participation or non-participation in this research would not affect any participant's volunteer status.

Furthermore, I was mindful of confidentiality in the interviews. I advised that participants were not required to speak about anything they were uncomfortable with sharing. I reminded them that their identity would be kept confidential by the removal of identifying material or disguising information when needed.

I was aware that there was a small risk that discussing crisis intervention experiences could prompt distress for some participants. With this issue in mind, I closely monitored the

emotional reactions of participants during the interviews. I anticipated that if a participant became distressed, I would provide support in the moment. If I had further concerns at the end of the discussion, I would suggest the utilisation of support services and make referrals for appropriate psychological services if necessary, in consultation with my supervisor who was a clinical psychologist.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim in its entirety - one interview by myself, and the remainder by an employed transcriber (Appendix G). I checked each transcript for accuracy against the recording. The transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, an interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that represents both the reflections of the participants and the active interpretation of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). Reflexive thematic analysis identifies, analyses, and reports patterns of meaning, or themes, across a data set, while acknowledging that meaning making is inherently contextual (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). As thematic analysis is not linked to a specific methodological framework, it can be used with flexibility, which can result in rich and complex data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexibility was appropriate for the current study to facilitate open exploration not limited to one single theoretical orientation in answering my research questions.

The thematic analysis for this study followed procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020). I read the data transcripts multiple times to identify initial codes that appeared interesting, looking for patterns across the data set. I then identified and categorised preliminary themes. Wider themes were conceptualised to incorporate various codes that addressed similar aspects within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). I then discussed these themes with my supervisor and further refined and named the themes. I identified verbatim quotes provided by participants to exemplify these themes. I then developed a thematic map to review the potential themes. I checked each theme for relevance both to the coded extracts and to the wider research

questions. Coded extracts were then organised into a pattern within each theme. The validity of each theme in how it reflected the data set as a whole was considered through re-reading of the data and checking for overlooked extracts or meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). A final thematic map was developed, which outlined each theme, how the themes fitted together, and the overall narrative of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

A total of 22 key themes were then defined and named, with a brief description identifying what was interesting and distinctive about each theme and why. I paired each theme with an accompanying analysis. A narrative was developed within each theme, and then within the overall data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). These final revisions of the themes were informed by feedback from my supervisor.

Quality in Qualitative Research

Given the interpretive, subjective approach of qualitative research and the lack of consensus for assessing its robustness, the quality of its findings has been critiqued (Leung, 2015). For this reason, researchers have established criteria to ensure the reliability and validity of qualitative research. In qualitative research, reliability and validity refer to the trustworthiness, accuracy, rigour, consistency, credibility, and quality of the research (Long & Johnson, 2000; Morrow, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a framework commonly used to establish quality in qualitative research. This framework outlined four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility in qualitative research involves the accurate representation of the experiences of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I took several steps to increase credibility in this study, using processes outlined by various researchers (Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004; Thomas, 2017). Before gathering data I familiarised myself with the area of research by reviewing the literature and consulting with important stakeholders (staff at LFT Chat). I followed ethical procedures and adopted a naïve inquirer style of interviewing to encourage forthrightness in

the interviews (Silverman, 2016). Throughout the interviews, I requested clarifications in the moment to ensure that I had a strong understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives (Morrow, 2005). During the analysis and writing process, I reviewed the data transcripts multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Thomas, 2017). I made ongoing efforts to hold the participants' words at the core of the findings, engaged in discussion with my supervisor and colleagues, and requested questions and feedback when presenting my research at research forums, in order to expand and support my interpretations (Hill, 2015).

Demonstrating the transferability of findings requires that data could be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Treharne & Riggs, 2014). To increase the transferability of this study by allowing comparisons to be made, I provided clear information on the research setting, the participants, and the research process (Morrow, 2005; Silverman, 2016). As the current study focused on the specific context of volunteer counsellors working for LFT Chat, the intention was not to achieve statistical generalisability but rather theoretical generalisability, which can provide potential understandings for people in comparable situations to those under study (Leung, 2015). The current research centred on the specific experiences of the LFT Chat volunteers who participated, with no intention of generalising findings across all volunteer counsellors. However, the findings may inform our wider understanding of the experiences of online volunteer counsellors working in similar contexts.

Dependability in qualitative research requires that a research trail is transparent, whereby other researchers could understand how the findings were produced (Silverman, 2016). To provide dependability in the current study, I kept a verbal audit trail of the research process with my supervisor and provided comprehensive methodological accounts to allow for the possible repetition of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Demonstrating the confirmability of a study requires acknowledging the inherent

subjectivity of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Theorists argue that a process of reflection and disclosure of reflexivity encourages varied forms of thoughts and behaviours that can heighten the robustness and validity of a given study (Braun & Clarke, 2020). I employed reflexivity in this study through reflective discussions with my supervisor and colleagues to challenge my personal views, and including a reflexive statement about the subjectivity I brought to this study (Hill, 2015).

Summary of Methodology

This research aimed to explore the experiences, training, and supervision needs of volunteer counsellors working for LFT Chat. I used an interview based qualitative method with an interpretative theoretical framework to explore the meanings and experiences of the volunteer counsellors from within the digital world they inhabit. The following chapter outlines the findings from my analysis of the data.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the themes from the individual interviews under three category headings: Working Online: Strategies for Dealing with Opportunities and Challenges, Emotional Experience of Online Counselling, and Supervision and Training. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes.

Table 2

Themes

Categories	Themes
Working Online: Strategies for Dealing with Opportunities and Challenges	Controlling the pace Managing the lack of visual and verbal cues Distinguishing between false and genuine service users Being able to talk text language Using a Peer support approach Managing suspicion from service users Getting to know service users through Instagram feeds Communicating internationally Reading distress online Managing suicide risk online
Emotional Experience of Online Counselling	It's easier to manage emotions online Feeling more comfortable talking online Identifying with Service Users Coping with Suicide Risk Exposure to Graphic Images Wanting to make a difference Not being allowed to help It's not enough Self-Enriching Impacts of the Work

Supervision and Training	Online counselling offers unique training approaches Learning about online youth culture and communication Needing support and connection

Working Online: Strategies for Dealing with Opportunities and Challenges

In this section, I present the themes I identified in participants' accounts relating to the challenges and opportunities of providing a text-based online counselling service through social media, and the strategies used by participants to respond to these. Through the analysis, I identified ten themes: Controlling the pace; managing the lack of visual and verbal cues; distinguishing between false and genuine service users; talking text language; using a peer support approach; managing suspicion from service users; getting to know service users through their Instagram feeds; communicating internationally; reading distress online, and managing suicide risk online.

Controlling the Pace: 'You get time to stop and reflect'

Participants explained that the time and space allowed by online communication provided the opportunity to use strategies including taking time to process the messages they received, formulate messages in response, and consult with other volunteers regarding the content of messages.

The majority of participants saw benefits in having the time to draft or delete messages when working online. They spoke about appreciating the ability to pause and think of what to say without the service users' knowledge:

> It gives us time to think. It's hard to think of the right thing to say on the spot, but you've got a few minutes to draft an appropriate response and they're none the wiser [P11]

Moreover, some participants explained that having the time to formulate and draft messages alleviated anxiety for them, as they had the time to plan their responses:

> You can think about what you're going to say before you type it in, and if it doesn't sound right you can backspace. It's very easy and it takes a lot of anxiety away because I have the time to formulate a message [P8]

Participants also noted that online communication allowed space for them to process the content of messages from service users, and manage their own reactions to the content before responding:

> It's easier to be able to stop and assess the situation before replying, especially if it's a big thing that they've just let out, then you can actually take the time to process your feelings on it and then figure out the best response [P13]

Participants stated that having this space to process their emotions was important, as they often had to deal with difficult disclosures from service users. One participant described the benefits of responding via text as compared with talking on the telephone:

> You have time to think and formulate an answer. Sometimes what the user shares can be so shocking and overwhelming that you just need to take a step back and digest it a bit. It gives you that luxury to sit back and take in what they've said and you don't feel like there's such a rush to fill that gap with words. If you're on the phone you don't have that opportunity [P7]

Further, some participants said that taking pauses came more naturally when working online compared to telephone or face-to-face communication, thus making communication easier:

> I find it a lot easier because I don't have the immediate need to respond. On the phone or in person if you take a few minutes pause… it's a bit awkward, probably not the best move, but on Instagram they're taking a few minutes to respond too [P13]

In contrast, some participants felt that with the slower rate of responding, it was difficult to have a complete conversation during a two-hour shift:

> In two hours it's hard, cause sometimes people reply and then they're gone for like 15 minutes and then they get back to you [P2]

Participants identified various strategies to implement when provided greater control of the rate of responding online. For example, participants identified the ability to consult their supervisors or fellow volunteers about their messages before sending them:

> Because it's over Instagram and you've got the support of everyone else on shift, you can take the time to figure out the right wording, you can ask someone 'hey how would you say this, how would you approach this', because you don't have to instantly reply [P13]

Participants explained that having the opportunity to consult with their fellow volunteers or a supervisor was important in helping them manage their anxiety and provided reassurance that their messages were appropriate for the situation they were dealing with:

> If I don't know what to say, I can rely on my supervisors and the other people on shift to discuss what direction we take the conversation in. That's really helpful, it takes the pressure off and eases your mind to know that you can type up what you want to say before you send it and read it to make sure it's right [P3]

Furthermore, participants spoke about the ability to look back over the written conversation to check if they have missed anything or to remind them of other avenues they might need to explore in helping a service user:

> It allows me to backtrack in the conversation, to adapt to their language. Over the phone, I might forget what they say two minutes ago. Having a written transcript of what's going on is incredibly useful. If I don't know what to say I can go back and say 'hey earlier you mentioned this, let's talk more about that'. It gives me a bigger playing field of where I can go in a conversation and how I can support that person [P15]

Some participants also explained that with greater control over the rate of responding, they could use the time to look back over service users' profiles to find potential conversation topics. They noted that this opportunity is unique to working through social media:

> You get time to stop and reflect. You can look through their profile and find things to discuss, which you don't get from a phone call. So it's easier to do it this way because you don't have to give immediate responses, you can think about it [P9]

This theme highlighted the many benefits participants saw in having greater control of pace and rate of responding online, in comparison to forms of communication that rely on

speech. Participants identified several strategies they used when afforded more time to respond, including looking back over the transcripts and Instagram feeds, consulting others regarding the content of messages, and managing their responses to the content better when afforded time to process their emotions.

Managing the Lack of Visual and Verbal Cues: 'You have to be a lot more upfront online'

Participants described the need to take active steps to manage the lack of verbal and visual cues when connecting with and approaching service users online. This theme illustrates the added challenges of communicating without visual and verbal cues online, and the strategies used by participants to mitigate those challenges.

Participants discussed the increased risk of misinterpretation in the absence of visual and verbal cues, with an inability to read facial expressions or body language:

> You have to interpret what each other's saying through text, and there's a lot that is misinterpreted, there's a lot of nuances missed if you can't see the person's face, their expression and their body language [P7]

To address misinterpretations when communicating online, participants spoke about the need to be direct in their messages, using clarifying questions to ensure their understanding:

> You have to be a lot more upfront online. You have to just ask 'Is this what you mean? Have I got this right?' and they'll usually say yes or no [P13]

While participants identified difficulties in understanding and interpreting service users' messages, they also shared the difficulty in ensuring service users understood their messages. Some participants noted the challenge of conveying to service users that they are listening, without the ability to nod their heads or use verbal prompts. One participant recalled how she had to learn different ways of showing users that she was hearing what they were saying:

> In a phone call or face to face you can give signs that you are listening, like 'hmm'. You can also use silence to give someone room to think or to elicit a response. Whereas with written communication it's hard to show that you're listening without interrupting what they're saying.

> Some people write lots of little messages more like speaking and you can send an 'oh okay' in between, but for people who just send one massive message… you have to show you you're listening and do all sorts of things within one message [P4]

Other participants described different methods for conveying listening in the absence of visual and verbal cues such as by using text reflections:

> You can't use your voice, so you've got to show that you're listening and convey nodding your head into text form. So lots of reflecting back what you've just heard, like 'oh yeah I hear that you were saying this, and it makes you feel like this' to make sure that they know that we're listening to them [P8]

Participants emphasised the need to convey empathy more explicitly through written communication. These participants spoke about conveying empathy through validating statements:

> You really have to show through your words that you understand how somebody is feeling, saying things like 'I totally understand what you're going through, it's a normal feeling that you must be feeling' [P10]

In explaining the need to convey empathy, participants recounted specific phrases they have developed over time, which they used to express empathy to service users in written form:

> I'll say little snippets that will get quite an emotional response from people. At the start of a sentence I'll go 'oh friend' then just continue what I'm saying. It gives you that personal connection to someone. I've had people who aren't interested in talking, giving one word responses, you'll say something like 'how are you feeling about that', and they'll say 'shit', and you go 'oh friend I see how that can make you feel really, really shit', and just by adding that they start talking [P7]

In general, participants identified the challenges of understanding service users and conveying listening and empathy in the absence of visual and verbal cues. Participants spoke about being upfront and curious with service users to address possible miscommunications. Participants also reported expressing their empathy and conveying that they are listening to service users online by using specific written language and phrases. This theme highlighted the active strategies that participants engaged in to address the absence of verbal and visual cues online.

Distinguishing between False and Genuine Service Users: 'If they have thousands of followers, we generally don't message them'

Participants explained that the risk of misinterpretation online extended to service users who participants believed were not genuinely distressed or wanting help. These participants felt that genuineness was harder to identify through written communication online. This theme describes the challenge of distinguishing between false and genuine service users online and the strategies participants used to face this challenge:

> There is the possibility that someone can be pretending. You can be anyone online. So someone could actually not being going through any issues and they're just wanting to cause trouble… or waste someone's time… but it's harder to tell through text [P1]

In some cases, participants had experiences that led them to mistrust whether service users were genuinely distressed. Again, they believed that an online setting made genuineness more difficult to detect:

> I sometimes can't read the other person. I had one experience where I was having a good conversation and all of a sudden it was just obviously a troll, sending all of these strange messages. That was a bit strange 'cause I thought it was going to be a really good conversation. Maybe if I had seen them face to face I would have noticed it right away [P6]

To mitigate the risk of approaching service users who are not genuinely distressed, participants recalled examining their Instagram feeds for clues:

> If they have thousands of followers, we generally don't message them because we found that they were just content creators, they weren't distressed, it was more likely someone who was creating content that depressed people would follow. Those ones we found weren't actually people who wanted support they were just posting content like any other Instagram [P4]

Some participants asserted that it was worth the risk of encountering disingenuous service users to ensure that they approached those who might require assistance:

> It's hard to pick out the people that are real or not because you don't want to ignore anyone that you might be able to help. So it's better to just reach out and then there'll always be the odd person that's taken advantage of that [P9]

This theme demonstrated that the majority of participants believed that service users could be insincere at times, and noted that it was harder to detect this online than in person. Strategies to mitigate this perceived risk included examining service users' Instagram profiles, however, some participants noted that it was safer to contact everyone who may be distressed to ensure that they are reaching those who need help.

Being Able to Talk Text Language: "You've got to stay up to date with the hashtags and key words"

Participants identified the specific use of language for communicating and building rapport with service users online. This theme illustrates how participants used online text language to connect with service users through social media.

Participants spoke about using abbreviations and symbols to connect with service users, mirroring their communication style to build rapport:

> I tend to mimic some of the words they used or the spelling of it…. Replying like that can help build rapport so like great 'GR8' or the emoji's that they've used. That makes it seem less artificial, lets them know that I'm a real person [P3]

Some participants, for example, recalled using swear words to mirror the language of service users:

> We try to stay up with the language and we often mirror what we're getting from the users. You can swear a little bit and stuff like that [P9]

As well as matching service users' language and symbol use, participants emphasised the importance of matching the tone of messages, for example by sending friendly messages to match those from a service user:

> If they're using lots of emoji's I'll use similar ones, if they're short handing everything I'll try do that as well. If they're super overly friendly I'll be really friendly back, if they're quite distant, kind of just matching that [P13]

Moreover, participants spoke about matching the length and rate of service users' messages to ensure the conversation is balanced:

> Some people would send massive messages and some people would send very short messages. So I try to match that… because if you were sending big messages and they were sending tiny messages it would become quite unbalanced and you probably were saying far too much [P4]

Participants also asserted that there is a need to stay on top of social media trends, including code words for various disorders, to understand the language used by service users online:

> You've got to stay up to date with the hashtags and key words. There are code names, like 'Ana' was anorexia and 'bd' was bulimia, for every kind of disorder they had different names so that it would go unnoticed on Instagram [P9]

In some cases, participants expressed frustration with the online language, including the extensive emoji use online, as it could prevent them from understanding and building rapport with service users:

> Some people love using emoticons, especially the users who are a fair bit younger like in their early tweens. We'll ask them a question and they might just reply with only emoticons. It's quite frustrating for us because we don't know what they mean, and we try to follow up with another question and then they might send us a gif [P14]

Participants identified the importance of using language to convey that they are real people to service users. Some participants stated that they left in spelling mistakes to appear younger and more authentic:

> There was a real focus on trying to sound authentic. If you make a mistake, you leave it in and don't sound like a robot. We'd leave spelling mistakes or use colloquial language so it seemed like a real person, and a young person [P9]

Another participant described using as natural responses and language as possible to build rapport with service users:

> Natural rather than robotic answers helped with rapport, it helps to get them to trust you more. If they say something and my reaction is like 'what', I'll say that. I will monitor my genuine reactions, but I'll pass those on. It gets them to see you as a person that they can open up to [P13]

While the majority of participants underlined the importance of language use online, some participants noted that they became more flexible with their language over time:

> I was very concerned when I started about getting things exactly right, but I learnt that even if you don't say exactly the right thing, the user will probably say 'that's not what I meant' and then you can just say 'sorry I think I misunderstood, did you mean this instead?' It doesn't change everything, it doesn't completely shut them down, it's just feedback you can respond to in your next message [P14]

This theme demonstrated the specific use of online language as an important tool for providing volunteer counselling using social media. Participants emphasised the importance of matching service users' length of messages, language, and emoji use to create balanced conversations. While used as a strategy for rapport building, emoji use appeared to be a source of confusion for some participants, as they could not understand what the service user was trying to say. Participants also spoke about using specific language to show that they are real people communicating with service users, which worked to build connection and rapport. Some participants reported relaxing into their use of language over time, reflecting increased flexibility that comes with experience.

Using a Peer Support Approach: 'You just have to think of them as your friend'

Participants stated they took an approach to the work that they saw as more of a peer support style rather than formal counselling. This theme describes how the participants approached their volunteer counselling as a peer support system.

Participants spoke about approaching and communicating with service users as if they would a friend:

> Sometimes you just think of them as your friend who you haven't spoken to in a while. You don't necessarily have to just talk about their problems, you can talk about something random and keep the conversation going until they have that trust in you, and that's when they would probably start talking about their problems [P2]

Further, some participants said that they used self-disclosure to build rapport, as would be expected when building a friendship:

> Sometimes you can disclose and say 'I've been in a similar situation', if they're having an argument with their friends or their parents and you can say 'that sucks, I've been through that too' and build rapport that way [P8]

Further, participants noted the need to appear friendly even in the very first message to engage successfully with the service user:

> You only have one shot to get the conversation started. We would send an initial message and knew that people would either reply or ignore it. So it was about trying to make that first message as friendly as possible [P4]

Another participant provided an example of how a casual, friendly approach to the conversation resulted in a service user opening up:

> I remember talking to a service user who at first really didn't want to talk to me at all, but we just started talking about life, and random things. They started opening up more and more, I could actually see it coming. Towards the end, they were sharing their personal problems [P2]

Participants talked about the need to balance taking the stance of a friend while also providing a counselling intervention:

> You've got to establish a balance between being their friend, but also being their support person. The friend side you need to be a bit jokeish, connecting on the very basic level of 'yes I like Rhianna' or things like that. Then as a support person you're like 'I am here to help you, let's talk about what you're going through and what can we do to make your situation better'. Once that bond is built, they open up more [P7]

Some participants felt that this informal, peer support approach was something that set their service apart from other counselling services. As one participant stated:

> We're there to have a chat with people, almost like a guide but in a friend's shoes. We avoid trying to take a clinical approach through the language that we use. There's no hierarchy between counsellor and client when I compare it to other services [P10]

Some participants expressed reluctance to refer to themselves as 'a service' in case it deterred the service user from having a real conversation with them:

> I feel very reluctant to call it a service. I don't want to scare them, I want them to think of us as just likeminded people who are willing to give them an ear. We are just humans talking to other humans, sharing a connection to help them be more open to receive formal support [P11]

Another participant identified a possible gap between young and older people's views of distress and mental health, suggesting that a casual peer support style may be more suited to young people:

> It stands out when users tell me their counsellor sucks. I don't want people to feel that way about me, and I assume that their counsellors are older and maybe an authority figure. Even my friends have seen psychologists, old people that just tell them to pull their socks up. Sometimes older people might not get it, they're a different demographic. There might be a difference in how older people view mental health, and we can bridge that gap [P5]

In general, participants described the strategy of taking a casual, peer support approach to providing counselling through social media. Some participants expressed a reluctance to call themselves service providers, with a fear that it would deter service users from engaging. It appeared that participants felt that this casual style was more age-appropriate for the service users, and that service users responded well to the approach. This theme highlighted the potential for formal support services to incorporate young people's preferences for informal peer support.

Managing Suspicion from Service Users: "We're reaching out to them, so we've got to justify why we're there"

As participants were making initial contact with service users based on the Instagram posts found by an algorithm, they reported a wide range of responses when making the first contact. One of these responses that posed a challenge for the participants was that of suspicion from service users being contacted online by a stranger. This theme describes how participants experienced and dealt with these suspicious responses from service users.

Participants said it was difficult to predict how service users would respond to their making contact, and that their initial overtures were often met with suspicion:

> It's a waiting game, you could reach out to ten people and only one replies. A lot of people reply asking 'why do you care?' [P4]

Some participants reflected that if they were in the position of the service user, they too would be suspicious of the motives of someone they did not know reaching out to them:

> Half the people have been suspicious in a way like 'who are you, why are you wanting to talk to me?' which is totally fine, I would probably have been like that if someone randomly tried to talk to me online [P1]

When responding to suspicion from service users, participants recalled struggling to explain who they were and why they had made contact:

> We're reaching out to them, so we've got to justify why we're there and why we're talking to them. Which can be difficult [P8]

To address service users' suspicions, participants described trying to sound less intrusive and emphasising the service user's choice to talk if they wanted to:

> People ask 'who are you? Why are you messaging me?' It's hard to explain, I don't want to say 'I'm from this volunteer group and we're here to help young people in distress' in case they say 'I don't need help'. So that's a tricky question to answer, but I try to make it sound as friendly as possible, like 'we're just here to help and lend you an ear if you want' [P2]

Participants also noted that suspicious service users were likely to have had difficult experiences with helping services in the past, so it was useful to be as upfront with them as possible regarding their motivations to provide support:

> For resistant users, it's important to be mindful that they've probably had to fight to have their emotions validated in their lives, so when someone is willing to give them attention and support it sends them a red flag. I try to lay it on the table as openly as possible, like 'oh you look like you're having a hard time, I think everybody deserves support when they're going through hard times', then seeing how they take that [P12]

Moreover, some participants explained that by explicitly naming the strangeness of contacting service users on Instagram, they were able to engage successfully with service users:

> I say 'I know I'm just a stranger on the internet and that must be really strange for you'. They seem to really like that one and go 'oh yeah it is a bit strange', which forms a connection. I've acknowledged that they don't know me and they haven't asked for me to talk to them but here I am. That always seems to work when someone's resistant to talking [P3]

Another participant noted that it was helpful to provide reassurance and convey empathy to suspicious service users by stating that they cared:

> Some might have had bad experiences or just have a normal apprehension towards mental health professionals in general, so they'll ask: 'Are we paid to do this?' And we just have to respond and assure them that we do actually care [P14]

Participants recalled service users occasionally changing their minds and choosing to engage with the service after initially declining support. These participants reflected that suspicious or resistant service users had likely received little support in their lives, and letting them know that they were available to talk if they changed their minds was an effective strategy:

> We get such a range of people. Some will say 'oh thank goodness you're here' and some will say 'no go away', so we say 'we'll be online for the next however long if you change your mind'. Then a couple of sentences later they start telling you 'oh actually life at home really sucks'. So there are people out there who really want the support and want to be listened to, but I think a lot of them never had the type of support, or the type of people who can adapt to where they're at [P12]

This theme demonstrated the challenge of managing suspicion from service users when approaching them online, and the strategies implemented by participants to mitigate this challenge. Overall, it appeared that most participants understood the suspicions of service users being contacted by the service, and felt that they would also be suspicious if approached by a stranger online. Participants identified difficulties in explaining the nature of the service, however noted that by being upfront and empathetic they could be successful in engaging service users despite their suspicions.

Getting to Know Service Users through Instagram Feeds: 'It can help you get a view of their mind state'

Participants identified the distinctive opportunity provided by working through social media to use service users' Instagram profiles as rapport building and intervention tools. This theme illustrates the participants' use of this strategy.

At the stage of making initial contact, some participants spoke about gathering information about potential service users to get an idea of how best to approach them:

> I'll go through their page and see what they've posted about, how frequently they post, what information I can find on them, to help establish that initial background so it's not just an out of the blue conversation, it's a bit more than that [P3]

In addition, some participants talked about how they could refer to a service user's Instagram content when stuck in a conversation:

> If you're stuck you can say 'I saw on your post that you're doing this and that and saying these things, want to talk about that?' Which can help… I think that can often open it up [P8]

Further, participants spoke about adapting their style to the impression they got from a service user's profile, for example asking about poetry if the service user had posted about it:

> Often they'll have shared poetry or their posts will kind of have a theme, so you'll talk about that, like their style. You can match the way they're talking [P9]

These participants explained that although the Instagram accounts they would typically interact with were impersonal accounts created specifically to disclose distress, participants were still able to get a sense of service users' personalities through their posts and captions:

> Most of the accounts we would interact with appeared to have solely been made to post this content and to express their feelings. So we weren't necessarily seeing their personal Instagram with photos of themselves. But they would post a photo with a caption and then you'd be able to read that, get their personality a bit from that, and build rapport from there [P4]

As well as building rapport, participants also described using service users' Instagram content as intervention tools, for example finding strengths and coping strategies in service users' hobbies or interests:

> I look at the person's profile before talking to them. Some people like to draw or play music, so sometimes I'll use the strengths they already have. It's really nice to use stuff that they're

> already doing or are good at. Its empowering for them being like 'yeah I can draw something' or 'yeah I can make some music to get my feelings out' [P5]

In some cases, while participants recognised the benefits of utilising service users' Instagram feeds to gather information, build rapport, and empower service users, they also noted that previous posts could distract them, interfering with their conversations:

> Because we've got the ability to go through all their past posts, it can be helpful for the conversations and to figure out their mind state. But also I think sometimes you can get a bit too far deep into it. You'll be wondering about this post from a month ago rather than focusing on what they're talking about now [P13]

One participant, for example, spoke about probing service users about particular posts when service users wished to discuss something else:

> I've looked at their posts and wanted to probe on what they've been talking about in those. Which can be helpful to get a view of their problems, but you can start to focus on the wrong thing, so you want to talk about this but they're opening up about that [P2]

Overall, participants saw the ability to look through service users' Instagram feeds as a useful tool for approaching service users, building rapport, and providing interventions. However, some participants recalled becoming distracted by this content at times, focussing on particular posts rather than being present with the service user in a conversation. Thus, this theme demonstrated the unique strategy and associated challenges of utilising service users' Instagram profiles when providing volunteer counselling through this platform.

Communicating Internationally: 'Being really inquisitive and finding out'

As the reach of social media is global, the participants spoke about communicating with people from all around the world. This theme describes the added challenges of international communication and the strategies the participants used in response to these challenges.

Participants spoke about the difficulty in providing useful resources to service users when unable to identify their location:

> We don't really know where in the world people are, so it gets a bit hard if we want to give them resources to use or what relevant numbers we might use. We are able generally to find international resources and things like that but that is quite a challenge [P5]

Participants also noted an added challenge of time zone differences when communicating internationally, where conversations could end abruptly due to service users going to sleep:

> Because the majority of us are in New Zealand, by the time we talk to someone it's too late in the evening for them. Because it's an international platform it is quite hard to talk to people on Instagram and get that conversation going just for them to come back and say 'oh I need to go to sleep' [P7]

Participants explained that when in different time zones, conversations with service users could be stilted due to delayed responses:

> It can be difficult sometimes, you'll see conversations that have lasted a few days where we've replied when we're on shift and then they've replied at 3 am in the morning for us, so it goes backward and forward like that [P8]

In the face of time zone differences, participants described concerns regarding discussing potentially distressing content when it may not be an appropriate time for the service user:

> You wonder whether you should start what could be a three-hour conversation right before they go to school. It feels like its digging a lot of things up [P14]

Participants identified various strategies to address these added challenges. Some participants said they aimed to manage the issue of time zone differences by contacting people who had most recently posted on Instagram:

> We would try manage the time difference by finding posts that were really recent, within the last couple of minutes, so that we knew they were possibly online and available for a conversation [P4]

Many participants reported utilising google translate in the presence of language barriers, which could miss some nuances in the language, so they kept their words simple and formal:

> We use google translate, but there can be issues with the way it translates the language. Sometimes a word or a sentence hasn't quite made sense. So we see how we can word it a little better for them or more simple words to accommodate the way google translate works. Some of the more casual words especially in kiwi language just don't quite work when its translated, so keeping it more simple but on the formal side of things [P3]

In some cases, participants decided to take a slower pace to accommodate language differences:

> You just have to slow down, choose more simple words and phrases. Keep it simple and slow so you can understand each other [P7]

Participants spoke about having difficulty understanding cultural contexts different from their own. They highlighted a need to be upfront, open, and curious about cultural differences to ensure they understand the circumstances of service users from diverse backgrounds:

> I talked to a girl in Korea who was struggling with exams. I had no idea what their schooling structure is like, what pressure they're under. In instances like that, you might not know the environment, and even the language that the person's using, you might not quite get it. So you just have to be really curious and genuine, admitting 'I actually don't know what that is, what's that like?' Being really inquisitive and finding out [P1]

Whilst participants noted the benefits of having a wider reach working through social media, they noted the added challenges of language and time zone barriers when communicating internationally. To address these barriers, participants described using google translate, asking explicit questions, taking a slower pace, conveying genuine interest, and targeting Instagram users who appeared active on the platform. Therefore, this theme illustrated both the geographic scope of services using social media and the active steps and strategies that participants took to work effectively within that global environment.

Reading Distress Online: 'We can see in the words that they've used'

Participants outlined the specific clues to look for when reading emotions and distress online. This theme captures the approach the participants took to reading distress online in the absence of visual and verbal cues.

Participants spoke about paying close attention to the tone and language expressed by service users, rather than explicit suicidal statements:

> I look for how they word things, so rather than them outright stating 'I want to cut my wrists' it's more how they're feeling, whether their post is super negative with distressing hashtags. When we talk to them, if they say 'life is awful' and those sorts of statements, then we'd try to assess risk [P13]

Some participants described examining the content of messages, looking for keywords as signs of hopelessness. As one participant stated:

> Looking for keywords like 'I'm so done with this, I just want my life to be over, nobody cares'. A lack of talking about the future or they can't really see past what they're currently going through and feel like there's no point, they've lost any excitement about life. If you sense that hopelessness you start wondering are they thinking of ending their life [P2]

Further, participants said that they looked for a change in service users' language and grammar use, where a loss of grammar or shortened messages may indicate an increase in distress:

> Sometimes we can see in the words that they've used or the grammar. So if they started off using proper grammar in every sentence and then the sentences become quite short and abrupt and then we can look at how it's changing. Sometimes it may get more abrupt or lose the grammar if someone is getting upset [P3]

Participants talked about the need to be upfront when asking about risk online, and asking earlier than they might in person or by telephone due to the absence of physical and verbal cues:

> You have to be open to asking fairly soon into the conversation if you think someone is suicidal. Online you've got no physical cues. You really have to at any sign of distress ask them are they feeling suicidal. You have to get into that serious stuff reasonably early on just to see where they're at, so it makes you communicate it a lot more abruptly [P1]

Another strategy identified by some participants was using the service user's Instagram feed as a tool to read distress:

> If they don't openly disclose that they're experiencing distress, you can go back and pull out clues from their post or profile. You can get an idea by their hashtags. You can see depending on what they've posted how they're feeling. You can look out for signs they're feeling hopeless. You can see in their language like 'I don't want to be a burden, I just have no hope' [P8]

Overall, the participants described a need to pay close attention to language and grammar when reading distress online. Some also identified using service users' Instagram feeds as a tool to gauge the distress levels of service users. The participants noted the need to be upfront when asking about suicidal ideation in the absence of visual and verbal cues. Thus, this theme demonstrated the relevance of understanding social media communication when reading distress online.

Managing Suicide Risk Online: 'How do we get help to you?'

Participants identified the added challenges of managing suicide risk in an ambiguous context on social media. This theme describes these added challenges and the strategies used to address them.

Most participants described the challenge of being unable to locate or identify service users to provide crisis resources based on the limited information available on Instagram:

> It's definitely a challenge that we don't know the person we're talking to, we don't know anything about them. Sometimes there is nothing to link us to anything like where they are, who they are, if we need to send help [P10]

Further, participants expressed having difficulty tracking distressed service users and an awareness that they could not deploy emergency services easily if they needed to. As one participant put it:

> We have no way of figuring out who a person is or where they are if we need to take it more seriously. If they're having serious suicidal crisis and they don't want to disclose anything to us behind the screen there's nothing we can do about that [P2]

In light of the barriers to managing suicide risk on social media, participants recalled using various creative strategies to find identifying information about distressed service users. One participant spoke about using the comments under an Instagram post to reach out to people who may potentially know the service user:

> If someone is saying 'I'm gonna take my life right now' we're like 'well where do you live, what's your name, how do we get help to you'. Sometimes if we see someone who's commented on the post we'll try reach out to them and say 'hey look we're worried about your friend, can you give us any details about them' [P12]

Participants provided further examples of using creative strategies to identify and send help to service users in crisis, by searching back through Instagram feeds to find clues such as licence plate numbers:

> We've found a photo of a car or a licence plate or they've tagged the location on one of their photos quite far back in their posts. I remember one person that wanted to die of hypothermia in a park. We knew that they lived in Canada and managed to get a rough idea of where they might be based on the temperature that they'd posted online that day, we were digging through different temperatures within Canada and found two within this area that had that same temperature… We managed to get the Police to help them [P3]

Overall, most participants identified heightened ambiguity when working on social media as an added challenge for managing suicide risk and deploying emergency services. Participants noted their own powerlessness when service users are not willing to identify themselves and detailed various creative strategies for mitigating these challenges.

Conclusion: Working Online: Strategies for Dealing with Opportunities and Challenges

Participant accounts suggested a range of opportunities and challenges in providing volunteer counselling through social media, and various creative skills and strategies used to deal with these. In the first instance, participants spoke about strategies they used when afforded greater control over the pace of responding online, including looking back over the transcripts and Instagram feeds, consulting others regarding the content of messages, and processing their emotional responses to the content. Participants outlined strategies they used to

mitigate the increased risk of misinterpretation and misrepresentation when working online, including being upfront, curious, and using specific written language and phrases. Participants described the need to distinguish between false and genuine service users online, deploying specific strategies for doing so including examining Instagram feeds. They also emphasised the importance of understanding text language and using this to connect with service users. With the target population for the service being young people, participants described using a casual, peer support style to communicate with service users. As their service uses a proactive outreach approach, participants also described using strategies including being open and genuine to justify who they are to service users.

Participants reported using service users' Instagram feeds as a tool to approach service users, build rapport, and identify strengths and coping strategies. As the reach of Instagram is global, participants underlined the need to address potential language and time zone barriers by using google translate and more simple word choices. Participants noted paying close attention to language and grammar when reading distress online. In the absence of visual and verbal cues, participants described the need to be direct when asking about suicidal ideation, and searching Instagram feeds to mitigate the added challenge of sending emergency services to service users with very little information available. Thus, providing volunteer counselling through Instagram appears to present several unique opportunities and challenges, which these participants utilised and mitigated actively through various creative skills and strategies.

Emotional Experience of Online Counselling

In this section, I analyse the emotional experiences of participants providing volunteer counselling online. I identified nine themes in participants accounts: It's easier to manage emotions online; feeling more comfortable talking online; identifying with service users; coping with suicide risk; exposure to graphic images; wanting to make a difference; not being allowed to help; having a limited reach; and life-enriching impacts of the work.

It's Easier to Manage Emotions Online: "there's less emotions attached"

Participants felt that online or written counselling was less emotionally demanding than it would be in a face-to-face or telephone setting. This theme describes why participants felt that online counselling was less emotionally taxing.

Each of the participants spoke about how the distance created by written communication, with a lack of verbal or visual cues, allowed them to remain calm and professional while providing support to service users:

> You can keep that little bit of a distance without being distant from the conversation. Being able to keep a more calm demeanour because you can't hear the tone in their voice [P3]

Some participants reflected that they experienced less emotional attachment to service users than they might have in person due to the lack of visual cues:

> Messaging people on social media is like a distancing thing for me, because I don't see who they are. There's less emotions attached to talking to them as it's over a computer [P5]

One participant shared that it was easier to focus on the content rather than the emotion of the conversation in the absence of physical or verbal cues:

> I find it easier to not see or hear them, I actually prefer it over [a phone counselling service]. It's less emotionally taxing. The distance helps. If I'm talking to someone in front of me I've very receptive to their behaviour and their expression. With these conversations, because I don't get all of that physical feedback it allows me to focus more on what they're saying [P14]

Many participants compared their experience of online counselling with their perceptions of telephone or face-to-face counselling, and came up with numerous differences. Some participants believed that it would be too painful for them to see or hear the emotions of a service user in a face-to-face or telephone setting:

> If I was to actually see the person, actually hear their voice, I would just feel devastated. Hearing that helplessness in the voice, or seeing them, I could actually feel the pain more than just reading the words [P2]

Participants reflected on a sense of separation created by written communication, allowing the conversation to be less personal:

> I'm the person that if someone in front of me is crying I'll cry with them. Having someone I don't know cry in front of me is quite hard. Talking online keeps it more separated and less personal [P1]

Further, some participants believed that the nature of online counselling protected them from taking on the emotions of service users and dwelling on these feelings after a shift:

> I like being over a computer and being able to type, because it allows me to have that safety. If I was on the phone with someone and they were bawling their eyes out I think it'd be a lot easier for me to take that on, and for me to then get stressed and anxious based off what I'm hearing. That would stay with me a lot more [P12]

Participants stated that they formed less of a connection with service users online than they might in person, which helps them to cope with distressing content:

> It's easier for me to stay more objective working online, so I'm not forming as much of an emotional connection with them. I'm able to empathise but remove myself from the situation, which is better for my mental health and for when I'm not on shift [P13]

One participant described the lack of verbal and visual cues as useful in reducing anxiety regarding supporting service users in crisis, and leaving the work behind after a shift:

> It's easier at the end of the shift to go away and not think about it. I was really worried that I would find it difficult to talk to people in crisis and that I would feel emotional after the conversation. It is easier than I thought because I don't actually hear a voice or see the person. It's just online and it almost feels like practice conversations we had in our training [P6]

This perception of emotional distance at times almost led participants to forget that they were communicating with real people, which they believed allowed them to be less affected by the content. As one participant put it:

> Sometimes I forget that they're a real person, we're talking about some really intense things and I remind myself that there's actually someone on the other side of the computer. It can be good because when they're talking about intense things its easier not to see who they are so maybe it doesn't affect me as much [P5]

Furthermore, some stated that they chose not to imagine the service user to protect themselves emotionally:

> I don't picture someone at the end of the line. Because if they're going through a real hard time, thinking 'oh gosh there's someone on the end of this message' is too much [P8]

In general, it seemed that all participants believed that working online was less emotionally taxing than face-to-face or telephone counselling. This theme suggested that the anonymity and distance created by online communication were central to this belief. Further, some participants described actively choosing not to imagine the service user to strengthen this sense of distance and protect themselves emotionally. As many of the participants are young people, this belief that online counselling is easier may reflect a general preference for online communication about sensitive or emotionally laden topics.

Feeling More Comfortable Talking Online: 'I hate talking on the phone'

The majority of participants stated that they felt more comfortable communicating via text online rather than speaking directly to others. This theme illustrates their preference for online communication both as volunteer counsellors and in their daily lives.

The majority of participants described choosing to volunteer for this particular service because it operates online rather than by telephone, so they believed they would feel more comfortable:

> I'd thought about joining [a phone counselling service] but I wasn't super into phone conversations. So I thought it was a cool opportunity to be able to help others in a way that I was more comfortable [P13]

Further, many participants expressed a fear of phone conversations, both as a counsellor and in their daily lives:

> For me communicating through DMs [direct messages] was easier. The idea of being a phone counsellor was terrifying to me because I hate talking on the phone [P4]

One participant, for example, described a strong dislike for talking on the phone:

> I was thinking of doing helplines but I'm very shy as it is, so I have to think about what I'm saying before I'm going to say it. I wouldn't want to be in a situation where I was talking on the phones, which I hate, so I was drawn to this service because it's on social media [P8]

Participants stated that in their own lives, the majority of their communication is based online:

> It's not very often that a friend will call me. So much of the communication in my life is online. I have my friends' phone number but we just speak on Facebook messenger all the time, that's how we communicate. If I'm telling them my problems or if they're telling me their problems we're usually just messaging online [P1]

Overall, most participants spoke about how they are more comfortable communicating online than by telephone in their daily lives. Participants explained that they would talk to their friends using social media and that they feel uncomfortable speaking on the phone. Participants noted that providing volunteer counselling using Instagram appealed to them because they could communicate online where they feel most comfortable. As the participants were largely young people, this theme reflected how growing up in a digital world might contribute to a greater preference for communicating online.

Identifying with Service Users: 'I'm a young person still and can relate to what they're going through'

As the majority of participants were themselves young people, they reported identifying closely with the young service users. This theme captures their experience of identifying with service users of a similar age.

Participants spoke about seeing similarities between themselves and service users. They explained that these similarities helped them to engage in conversation, and understand and empathise with what service users are going through:

> They're usually young people, I'm a young person still and can relate to what they're going through. A lot of the struggles we talk about I've been through myself. So I can feel empathy towards them with things such as bullying or friendship, relationship issues, parent issues. It makes me relate and build up a better conversation with them through that [P10]

Some participants, for example, said that if they had not been through similar issues, then they knew someone who had, which they believed helped them to relate to and validate the experiences of service users:

> It's easy to understand what they've gone through because either I myself have gone through it or someone I know has gone through it. So taking that in, understanding what that feels like and letting them know that it's okay to feel like that, that they are not alone in this world [P3]

While some participants described an ease in understanding and relating to service users in familiar circumstances, others noted that identifying with service users could also be a painful experience:

> The cases where there's similarities to my own experiences can be quite heavy hitting. Nothing is ever the same, but sometimes there'll be a strain of something and you can really connect with that. That can be tough [P6]

Some participants explained that the conversations where they identified with service users were the most challenging for them, as they could evoke their own unresolved issues:

> I think the hardest conversations are the ones that hit more personally. Most of us come in with our own experience of these types of things, so certain topics can be triggering [P13]

These participants noted that the impact of these particular conversations could stick with them for days after a shift:

> If it's a really heavy shift, the next day we could feel a little bit down or affected by it. Especially if a user spoke about something that reminded you of someone you knew or with similar circumstances. Those were the really tricky ones [P4]

Participants also described struggling emotionally with the process of drawing on their own experiences for role-plays in training:

> One of the most confronting parts of the training was doing the roleplaying. I'm not normally super emotional but it really got to me. It was just a combination of dealing with quite heavy subject matter and actually having to put myself in the user's shoes. Role-playing through that that was quite difficult for me, because the story was pretty close to home. [P15]

In contrast, one participant explained that the most difficult conversations were those where a service user had no family support, as the participant relied heavily on family herself and could not imagine coping without it:

> The thing that gets me the most is when people don't have a good relationship with their family, that's harder for me to fathom than any other issue they might be having. Because the first thing I do is talk to my mom, and when I'm talking to someone, I'm thinking like 'oh why don't they just talk to their mom about it', but obviously not everyone has that sort of relationship. For me that's the hardest, cause I always have that support system and it's hard to know that others don't [P6]

Similarly, another participant reported feeling guilty when speaking with service users who are of a similar age yet do not have the same privileges as her:

> Some users will say 'I really want to go to school but I can't go to school because X, Y and Z' and I'll think oh my gosh, here we are not taking lectures seriously and then there's people over here that would love to have that opportunity. I can get caught up in that and feel quite guilty [P11]

In some cases, participants expressed feelings of hopefulness that because they had gotten through similar issues, service users can as well:

> It's interesting coming full circle and now being the person who helps people in a similar position to how I felt a few years ago. It keeps me hopeful. I came out the other end from quite severe depression at the time. It makes me hopeful that the people we're talking to aren't completely doomed and they could get better too [P10]

This theme illustrated the experience of participants in identifying with service users of a similar age and circumstance. In general, it seemed that most participants, themselves young people, identified with the young service users. This identification was a source of pain for many participants, with some feeling the impact of these conversations for days after a shift, and others experiencing guilt and shock at the privilege gap between themselves and service users. However, for participants who had been through and recovered from severe distress themselves, they experienced feelings of hope that the service users could also see improvements.

Coping with Suicide Risk: 'I feel really sad for them'

Participants recalled experiencing several emotional reactions in response to suicidal service users. This theme describes the emotional experience of the participants in coping with suicide risk online.

Each of the participants noted having emotional responses to suicidal service users such as sadness and feeling overwhelmed:

> I get very sad. I feel for them and I think it's unfortunate that a lot of them are very young and are suicidal and they feel like they've got no option. Sometimes it's a bit overwhelming [P11]

Some participants expressed a strong desire to protect or care for suicidal service users. As one participant put it:

> It is sad thinking about all of those people and all of those posts … I remember there's so many times after someone's told me they're suicidal, I've just sat back and thought I want to give you the biggest hug right now [P3]

Further, some participants spoke about feeling tired when talking to suicidal service users. They also expressed disappointment for the service users and their unfortunate circumstances, and disappointment at the state of the world:

> It can be tiring talking to suicidal service users. A lot of the issues that I hear I'm like wow that is really full on, I don't know how you're living life coping with all of that. I feel really sad for them that they're in that situation. I get disappointed that the world is like this. There's shitty parents and shitty teachers and shitty health professionals [P8]

Along with experiencing emotional responses to suicidal content, participants also identified anxiety in themselves around asking service users about suicide:

> I was very, very anxious I remember to even ask somebody if they were feeling suicidal, I thought it was a touchy subject to straight out ask somebody, like a total stranger. But I've had no adverse reactions from doing that so far [P10]

One participant, for example, described avoiding the question when she first began volunteering:

> When someone mentions suicide, it does always fluster me. It isn't the type of conversation that you have every day. I felt awkward to ask those abrupt questions like 'are you going to kill yourself'. I actually beat around the bush the first couple of times but then I just said it, and after a while, you know that you just have to say it [P7]

Most participants asserted that while the fear of asking about suicide was present, it became easier with practice:

> A challenging aspect of the conversation for me was actually thinking of the right way to ask someone 'are you suicidal?' I found gauging when it was the right time to ask was quite difficult, but it got easier the more I did it [P15]

Overall, it appeared that participants experienced a variety of emotional reactions to suicidal service users and assessing suicide risk. These reactions included feeling overwhelmed, sad, flustered, and disappointed. The majority of participants also experienced anxiety in asking service users directly about suicide, however, they noted this anxiety eased with time and practice. Thus, this theme demonstrated the pressure and fear surrounding the management of suicide risk, and the positive effects of experience for working in this field.

Exposure to Graphic Images: 'It's burned in your memory'

Participants discussed their exposure to the graphic images posted on Instagram, typically of self-harm, when communicating with service users through social media. This theme illustrates participants' emotional experience of this exposure.

Participants spoke about the disturbing nature of these images of self-harm, and described the images staying with them following a shift:

> It could be quite upsetting and shocking especially seeing the more graphic, bloody photos, they could stick with you for quite a while [P4]

Some participants expressed feelings of shock, and explained that these images could be distracting when making conversation with service users:

> The first time it was shocking, because I haven't been exposed to that before. It makes me feel slightly on edge when I first look at it, and distracts me a bit when I'm talking to the person [P6]

While participants described these graphic images staying with them after shifts, they also noted that viewing the images allowed them to understand the scope and significance of self-harm:

> The self-harm is hard because they share the pictures of that, so you've seen, and it's burned in your memory. Knowing that there's so many people that are dealing with that is one of the things that you take away [P9]

Another participant stated that while becoming accustomed to these images over time, seeing them also conveyed the seriousness of their work:

> At first you're pretty shaken up, you get used to it but it's just hard when you're talking to them knowing that that's what they're doing right now. It makes it really serious [P7]

While many participants recalled having negative emotional responses to viewing these graphic images, some participants noted that the distance created by viewing them online rather than in person made it easier for them to continue with the work:

> They can be very graphic, but because it wasn't in person it was a lot easier, and usually they wouldn't have their face in it, if it was their arm it'd just be their arm. So that helped distance it a bit more, it's not as in your face, so I could just keep talking to them [P13]

Participants also described feeling protected by the supervisors from the most graphic content, as the supervisors would sort through the accounts before assigning conversations:

> The shift supervisors would try to keep everyone away from the worst content, they would say 'oh this persons put a photo of this are you okay to see that'. That made it easier [P4]

This theme demonstrated the sense of shock for participants when viewing graphic self-harm images posted on Instagram, and how these images would stay in their memories after a shift. For some participants, the images helped them to understand the gravity and breadth of issues of self-harm worldwide. For others, they felt protected by supervisors, and by the distance created by viewing these images online rather than in person.

Wanting to Make a Difference: 'It's good when I feel like I've done everything I needed to'

Participants spoke to their desire to make a difference with service users and recalled experiencing positive emotions when they saw clear results in their conversations. This theme describes participants' experiences of wanting to make a difference in their work.

All of the participants reported experiencing positive emotions when they believed they had made progress with the service user during a conversation. As one participant explained:

> I feel the best when I've been able to do something for them, I've given them some resources, we've talked through some strategies, so let's hope it works [P5]

Participants described feeling fulfilled when believing there was a clear result and an action plan was developed for the service user:

> It's so fulfilling when you can help someone process what they're going through, and come away with a clear action plan. When you can leave the conversation knowing you've worked together to come up with a plan of what they can do, a coping mechanism they can use next time they're feeling that way. That's always a good outcome [P15]

As an example of a clear outcome, one participant recalled an instance where the service user worked through a distraction tool provided by the participant during their conversation, and then they discussed the outcome of using that tool:

> I remember talking through the ice cube trick as an alternative means to self-harm. They actually did it when we were messaging, which was really cool, cause most people just say 'oh I'll do that another day'. So they tried it and we talked about how it felt and they said 'oh yeah it was weird but I think I could give that a go next time I want to self-harm'. So it was cool to have hopefully given someone a tool that won't just help them on that evening, but will help them on other evenings [P4]

Another way in which participants felt they made a difference in their interactions was through positive feedback from service users. As one participant stated:

> When users say 'I haven't talked to anyone about this before and it just feels so good to talk to someone' I find that really positive and that's a turning point, I think okay this conversation went well and I'm quite satisfied. When people say 'thank you for listening to me' is when I think something's gone well [P5]

One participant, for example, described being moved to the point of tears by positive feedback from a service user:

> The conversation ended on a really good note, and I teared up a little cause at the end they were like 'thanks to you I could go to sleep without crying tonight'. So that was really nice [P2]

Some participants noted that while they were uncommon, the conversations that felt they had come to a natural conclusion or result were the most rewarding:

> It's good when I feel like I've done everything I needed to in a conversation and at the end we actually reach a conclusion, or I feel like there's nothing more that we needed to do for that person. That doesn't often happen but when it does it's really satisfying [P14]

The impact of these positive experiences and clear results seen in conversations with service users was evident in participants' statements that these experiences kept them going in their work. As one participant stated:

> If you feel like you're really moving forward and that you're helping, those are the really positive ones, they're kind of like a ray of sunshine in the grey of it all. It helps motivate me to keep going [P13]

These participants explained that the conversations with clear results and positive interactions with service users have affirmed their skills and raised their confidence in their subsequent interactions:

> Those [positive] interactions make it worth it and they're really necessary to have, so you can keep holding hope for the other people that you interact with. It gives you belief in yourself when you're recommending things if you know that they have worked for others. Just to know that there are people who have said you really helped them, those interactions make you feel like you made a difference, and that you're one small part of all the different factors that are keeping that person safe. That provides more confidence that this is the field that I'm really passionate about, I am good at this [P4]

Further, most participants asserted that perceiving a clear result in an interaction led them to feel that they were making a difference:

> What keeps me going is the fact that I can see that I'm making a difference, so I'm actually aware of the help that I'm giving someone. Sometimes they thank you and say they need more people like me around, and it's just the best feeling [P2]

In general, it seemed that all participants experienced positive emotions when they believed they had made a difference and had seen a clear result in their interactions with service users. Participants identified various interactions they saw as evidence they were making a difference, including making collaborative action plans, service users' reports of tools or coping strategies working, and positive feedback from service users. They noted these interactions drove their motivation and confidence to continue volunteering. Thus, this theme illustrated the strong desire of participants to make a difference in their work.

Not Being Allowed to Help: 'I do everything I can and there's just no progress'

Participants recalled struggling with service users who would not engage with or open up to them. This theme describes how the participants experienced and made sense of these responses from service users.

The majority of participants reported experiencing frustration when service users responded but did not seem to engage fully in the conversation. They recounted trying as hard as they could to build rapport with no success:

> Sometimes you're desperately trying to have a conversation and they just say 'I don't know'. You can't get the rapport going or the person won't open up. So that was quite difficult, people who didn't want to engage were probably one of the most frustrating things [P4]

Further, participants felt disappointed that they missed opportunities to help the service users who appeared not to fully engage with them. Some felt they would inadvertently match the cold tone of service users' messages:

> A lot of service users will be quite closed off and blunt, and it almost makes me a little bit closed off and disappointed in where the conversations going compared to how it could go if somebody were to open up a little bit more [P10]

Some participants believed that service users who would not open up were more challenging than those who were suicidal. These participants described trying everything they could to get service users to open up:

> The most challenging part is when someone is in trouble but won't open up. You can tell they're in trouble because of the content that they're posting, and you're trying to help but they're just so closed off, yet they're still replying. I do everything I can and there's just no progress. That's the saddest part because they're struggling but they're not open to the idea of things getting better [P7]

Furthermore, participants recalled struggling to keep conversations going and running out of ideas when service users respond with one-word answers:

> The hard ones for me are really slow, they're not giving much and you're trying to keep the conversation going. They're still responding but one word answers, so it's hard for me to think of things to say and keep them engaged and still sound authentic [P9]

Some participants felt that they would run out of skills and techniques to engage service users when service users did not open up to them:

> It's the hardest when you're trying to ask all these questions and they give you one word answers, or you're trying to give them options or change their perspective on things and they just deny it. It gets difficult for me if someone isn't really showing me any strengths that we could use. Obviously people do still have strengths, but it's just hard when you're not really giving me much to work with [P6]

Several participants expressed fears that they could say the wrong thing, leading service users to disengage and participants to feel that they have failed:

> It could be quite draining and tiring when the user is not really engaging, just giving one word responses. It gets frustrating for me but I still want to help them out. I'm always really scared that I'm gonna say something and someone's gonna build up a wall or just leave. That will make me feel like I failed in a way [P5]

Moreover, participants spoke about blaming themselves or their skill level for service users not responding or engaging:

> Quite often you'll have a shift and think I'm totally useless at this, nobody wants to talk to me, but you've got to make yourself realise that they're not going to talk if they don't want to, regardless of what you say [P10]

The majority of participants described feeling disappointed or guilty when they were unable to make progress with a service user. As one participant stated:

> Sometimes you feel unsatisfied or like you haven't done enough. If they aren't making progress, that feeling will stick with you a bit. If you've put a lot of work into it and nothing really progresses it's a bit like you've failed. You'll feel disappointed, sometimes depending on the conversation a little bit of guilt [P13]

Participants recounted feelings of hopelessness in the absence of a clear or positive outcome for a service user. One participant, for example, recalled a conversation that stuck with her, where she felt she was unable to make a difference:

> I just felt like I couldn't help her, I tried to offer support in whatever way I could, but in the end I couldn't make a difference. You can usually find some anchor for them or some support that they've got, but I was asking 'any friends, any family?' and she said 'no they've all disowned me'. Then she mentioned god, I was like 'are you religious have you gone to church?' she said, 'no, no-one's welcoming of me'. It was hard because it was very, very hopeless situation. And I wasn't able to help [P8]

Overall, it appeared that when service users were not willing or able to open up to or fully engage in a conversation, participants experienced frustration and disappointment. Participants also recalled at times feeling at fault for service users not fully engaging with the service, and running out of techniques to respond to service users' resistance. They also expressed dissatisfaction in the absence of these clear outcomes. Thus, this theme demonstrated the strong motivations of participants to help others, and the sense of failure they felt when unable to engage effectively with people.

It's Not Enough: "I wonder what's going to happen to them"

Participants described their emotional experiences of working within the constraints of brief intervention online. This theme illustrates the participants' experience of working in a brief intervention capacity with an inability to provide longer-term assistance to service users.

The majority of participants recalled experiencing sadness at the number of distressed service users on Instagram, and their ability to contact only a small portion of these people. As one participant explained:

> The sheer amount of suicidal posts could be quite depressing, and just knowing that even if you do have good interactions with people, there's still thousands more that you don't even have time to contact [P4]

Many participants spoke about struggling with the fact that the conversations with service users could end at any time, with no opportunity for follow up. These participants were concerned that the risk of an abrupt end to their interactions was heightened online:

> There's definitely a sense of urgency. Like I need to connect with this person now. Because there's that underlying worry that there's only so much we can do over the internet. If this person doesn't want to respond then I can't stop them from leaving. That's hard. People can walk away a lot easier online [P10]

Some participants, for example, noted the difficulty in predicting how long a service user would stay engaged in a given conversation:

> You never knew how many messages you were gonna get because people would quite often just stop replying. With a phone call, it's easier to sense that we're wrapping things up so you can check if they have everything they need. Whereas this might be your only message with them [P4]

Further, participants expressed concerns regarding the possibility that when service users stop replying that they could have committed suicide:

> The people who don't reply to the first message is not that worrying because they might not be online. But the people who start conversations and then just stop replying, that's a worry. There used to be a saying 'as long as someone's speaking to you then at some level they're safe because they're conscious and still with us'. Whereas with messaging you really don't know [P14]

Following these conversations, participants spoke about struggling with the knowledge that they could not follow along with service users' progress to see if their circumstances had improved:

> It can be scary having conversations with people who are in pain or thinking about committing suicide and then not knowing… I'm never going to talk to them again and won't know if they've gone through with it or if they've gotten better [P6]

The majority of participants found themselves wondering about service users following a conversation:

> Maybe an hour after my shift I'll be like 'that's a real person and I wonder what's going to happen to them', and a week later I'll feel them pop into my head and wonder how they're doing [P5]

Further, some participants expressed concerns about whether they had done enough to help service users following conversations:

> I'd end up thinking did I say enough or could I have said more. Especially when it's young people, there was one I'm sure was like eight or something, you just worry about them and the feeling stays sometimes [P9]

Some participants explained that the feeling of uncertainty and concern for the safety of service users would stay with them after a shift has finished:

> It definitely leaves me with a lot of curiosity but I try not to worry and let it bother me when I go home. I find myself wondering how certain service users ended up. I get quite worried for people… you just never know the state that they were really in [P12]

One participant provided a specific example of a conversation that has stuck with her, where she had formed a strong connection with a service user but was unable to follow the service user's progress:

> That curiosity factor brings you down a bit. I was talking to this one person for hours and they were quite serious, they had a plan, they had access to means to end their life. We focussed on distraction techniques and I linked them up with services in the [United] States. We'd developed a really good rapport, I was chatting how I would with a friend. I found myself wondering for quite a while afterwards how they ended up, did they end up going to speak to anybody, are they still alive [P10]

In contrast, some participants reported an ability to leave a shift behind them, finding comfort in the fact that service users were aware of the service and could re-engage if they chose to:

> I've always found it pretty easy to detach. Once my shifts over I usually feel happy with the work that I did so I just go to sleep. It would be the same even if the conversation was left

> unfinished, at the end of the day we can't help someone who isn't ready to seek that help for themselves. So as long as they're aware that we exist then I think that settles my heart [P14]

One participant shared about making a conscious effort to protect herself from the uncertainty that comes with providing brief intervention:

> As soon as my shift is over, I just think 'okay that's done' and kind of bank it…. You just need to be comfortable with the uncertainty of it. You can't carry someone else's burden, that's so much to handle and I think maybe it's a protective mechanism of my own mind, just like okay I'm done now [P7]

This theme demonstrated the heightened restrictions and ambiguities of providing a brief intervention in an online setting, with an inability to follow along with service users' progress. In addition, participants also expressed concerns regarding the fact that online conversations could end abruptly at any given moment. The limited reach of brief intervention, where only a small number of potential service users can be reached, was also a source of concern for participants.

Self-Enriching Impacts of the Work: 'It's helped me on a very personal level'

Each of the participants shared about the self-enriching, lasting impacts of online volunteer counselling work in their lives. This theme demonstrates how participants understood and made sense of these self-enriching impacts.

The majority of participants felt they had become more self-aware through their work with LFT Chat, and more able to recognise and process their own emotions:

> I think it's benefitted my ability to recognise my emotions and other people's. So I've been able to recognise my emotions more and take action when I need to [P13]

Participants explained how this increased self-awareness extends to increased knowledge and skills for looking after themselves. As one participant put it:

> It gave me perspective from the other side, I no longer only relate to being a struggling young person, but I can also see how I can help myself. I'm more aware of when I'm going through periods of difficulty what I would say to myself if I were the user. So it's helped me on a very personal level [P7]

Several participants described the skills they learned through their work and training translating into their daily lives. They explained that they have become more aware of the skills they use when communicating with others:

> When I talk to people in real life now I'm like 'oh I'm giving them validation, I'm giving them affirmations' and that's really nice, especially in a conversation that's a little bit heavy, when you're able to steer a conversation to the right place and apply those skills to real life [P2]

Further, participants noted that the skills they learned through their work have improved their ability to support their friends:

> When my friends come to me with problems now I can say things like 'thank you so much for telling me this', acknowledging that I'm someone that they're coming to and that they're brave for telling me. I use a lot of the micro skills casually in conversations with my friends. It's been a positive thing for conversations [P5]

One participant, for example, recounted a specific instance where she was able to assist a friend in crisis due to her experience in volunteer counselling:

> I wouldn't have been able to deal with certain situations if I hadn't gone through the training. One of my friends messaged me saying 'I need help'. I just knew in my gut it was bad, and I don't think I would've known otherwise. I went straight to her house, she was in a really bad state. On the way there I was thinking I need to ask her if she's thinking of suicide, and I thought okay I've done this before so had the confidence to go and do it. And I knew the steps of what we could do [P9]

Participants also described applying the conversational capabilities developed in their work as volunteer counsellors to their work in different fields, such as customer service:

> I use the skills in customer service quite a lot. It's helped me learn to generate conversations more easily, just asking questions and running with what they say [P13]

Some participants articulated a shift in their perspective to a more compassionate stance and an understanding that people who behave in difficult ways are likely to have been treated poorly in life:

> Everyone has challenges that aren't present on the surface. It reminds me to be compassionate and empathetic to everyone because you don't know the full story. A lot of people that are coming across as aggressive are probably acting that way because they've been hurt. It gives

> me a starting point to reflect on society and the impact of our actions, whether we are aware of them or not [P11]

Further, participants spoke about a change in the way they view and talk about mental health in daily life, taking it more seriously:

> In general you become more mindful about mental health, it's not just a flippant thing, we know it's not just an easy or glamorous thing. Like with the movie 'a Star is Born', I love Lady Gaga but when it came out all of us said 'oh this doesn't feel right'. That's a discussion that we're more willing to have. It's a perspective that isn't shared amongst mainstream people [P7]

One participant, for example, reported feeling more equipped to discuss issues of mental health than before:

> Beforehand I was still probably quite open and encouraging of conversations around mental health. But I'm better equipped for it now [P13]

The majority of participants also noted a change in their social media use. Participants spoke about an awareness of what they post on Instagram and how that can affect people who are struggling:

> It's made me reflect on how I'd post. I almost don't wanna share if I go to some cool party or if I go to a fancy place, I don't wanna put it out there if other people are gonna watch it and might feel bad about their lives [P11]

Moreover, some participants spoke about how they have changed whom they follow on social media, removing people who do not make them feel good about themselves:

> I don't follow anyone who's all about being perfect and looking a particular way anymore. I follow people who are more about body positivity and taking care of yourself, because it comes up on your feed and that tends to give me a better mind-set, and challenges the stereotypes and social pressures that I put on myself because of what society has told me. It challenges me to think a different way [P7]

Many participants also expressed an increased desire to raise mental health awareness online:

> What's changed is now I love posting stories about self-care and about mental health. I'm a bit more comfortable spreading awareness, and spreading love [P5]

This theme illustrated the lasting impacts perceived by participants of working as a volunteer counsellor on a social media platform. Participants described increased self-

awareness and abilities to self-care, increased skills in communicating with and supporting friends, a shift in perspective on mental health, and changes in their personal social media use.

Conclusion: Emotional Experience of Online Counselling

Participant accounts suggested a range of emotional experiences when working as a volunteer counsellor online. In the first instance, participants felt that providing counselling in an online setting is less emotionally demanding than other forms of counselling. In turn, most participants reported feeling more comfortable communicating online in comparison to by telephone or face-to-face, both as a counsellor and in their daily lives.

As many participants were themselves young people, they spoke about identifying closely with young service users, which could be distressing and might stay with them following a shift. When dealing with suicide risk specifically, participants described feeling overwhelmed, sad, flustered, and disappointed. Participants explained that while they felt shocked by the graphic images of self-harm posted online, they felt protected by supervisors and the emotional distance created by viewing these images online, and these images helped them to understand the seriousness of self-harm for young people.

Participants described experiencing positive emotions when they perceived a conversation to be a success. On the other hand, they expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment when they felt unable to help service users who do not open up or engage fully in conversations. Participants also expressed frustration at the limited reach of brief, online intervention, where conversations could end at any time, and participants were not able to follow along with service users' progress. Finally, participants spoke about many positive, life-enriching impacts of their work.

Supervision and Training

This section captures participants' experiences of supervision and training, as well as their descriptions of their training and supervision needs insofar as these relate specifically to online counselling. The participants spoke about training and supervision more generally, but I have extracted data that provides insight into the particular challenges and opportunities for supervision and training in the online environment. Their accounts suggested three themes: online counselling offers unique training opportunities, the importance of learning about online youth culture and communication, and needing support and connection.

Online Counselling offers Unique Training Opportunities: "They could observe every conversation"

Participants outlined several unique opportunities for training using a social media platform. They noted valuing a graduated approach to the work, with opportunities to observe and consult with supervisors and have simulated conversations using Instagram in training. This theme describes participants' experiences of the distinctive training approaches for working on a social media platform.

Many participants recalled being eased into the work, beginning with an introduction of counselling micro-skills, followed by practice conversations with supervisors posing as service users on Instagram, and receiving ongoing feedback on their progress:

> They ease us in with the micro-skills, like affirmations, open-ended questions. Then we go through test scenarios where we sit back to back and have conversations or one of the supervisors will be outside pretending to be a user and all of us would be around the computer and we're typing our response. Then we go into the harder deeper stuff and have fake conversations around if someone was at high risk. A supervisor would always be there to give feedback and you also self-reflect [P7]

These participants noted that there was no pressure to move to live conversations with service users until they felt comfortable to do so. They described that due to this lack of pressure and the ability to simulate conversations online they never felt that they were out of their depth:

> We had a couple of training shifts, so we'd just talk to the supervisors who would pretend they're service users. Then once we felt comfortable enough to actually talk to a person we'd do that and got lots of support, which was good. There was never a time where it felt like I was dealing with something that was too much for me to handle [P8]

Given the distinctive opportunity to simulate online conversations in training, some participants noted that the live conversations felt the same as practice conversations, facilitating the transition from role-plays to the work with real service users:

> I wouldn't have been able to just jump in. The practice conversations were super helpful because when I started doing live shifts it almost felt like I was doing the practice conversations, because it was just the same thing, it was just on a computer typing about similar things cause the supervisors know what conversations we'd be having, so they just simulated those [P6]

Further, some participants spoke about benefiting from an initial period of checking each message with a supervisor and spending time observing other volunteer counsellors on shift to build their knowledge and skills. This is a distinctive opportunity afforded by working online in a written format:

> Your first shift you can just observe, which gives you a lot of insight into how the conversations are, from other people on shift and the discussions around that. Then the next stage was moving on to having an active conversation but checking every message with the supervisor. That development through is really good to be able to figure it out [P13]

Participants believed that this ongoing input from supervisors allowed them to feel comfortable dealing with difficult situations while on shift:

> You don't really know what you're gonna get thrown at you, but then it's really nice that they've got the shift supervisor there to talk through anything [P11]

One participant recalled an instance where she felt lost and unable to continue with a conversation with a service user, so a supervisor took over the conversation:

> I didn't know what to respond, I could sense how bleak that person's life was. I think that was when I said to the supervisor 'I can't, I don't know what to say'. It's really good when the supervisor jumps in cause they magically know what to say [P7]

Some participants described seeing the ongoing input of shift supervisors as constant supervision and training. As one participant put it:

> They were very hands on, there was always one shift supervisor to about three or four volunteers. They could observe every conversation and every interaction because we're all logged in to the account, so it was almost like constant training and supervision [P4]

These participants stated that with this graduated approach to their training, their confidence and flexibility in responses grew over time:

> It was a learning curve, I used to write huge paragraphs and check with supervisors because I wanted to make sure that I was replying right and not going in the wrong direction. With more experience, I got better at understanding what they were trying to say and how they were feeling [P14]

More experienced participants noted that with time, they no longer felt the need to consult with supervisors regarding their messages:

> It was a little bit intimidating doing it by yourself but you get used to it. I reached a point where I feel pretty comfortable with what I'm sending I don't necessarily need someone with me to check [P4]

While the majority of participants noted the benefits of being eased into the work, one participant recalled feeling daunted and over-prepared by the various scenarios provided in training, noting that when she began live conversations the content was less disturbing than she expected:

> I think the training was worse than the actual volunteering because in training you have to go through all the worst-case scenarios so that you're prepared. I think by the second day I was like 'oh god this is so depressing, this is not what I want to be doing', but it did prepare us for the worst and that makes it better almost because when you're actually talking with users in real life it's not always as bad [P7]

This theme demonstrated the unique opportunities afforded by training in an online space, including the ability to engage in text role-plays, pausing to check messages with supervisors, and observing fellow volunteers conducting live conversations. Supervisors are able to take a more active role in the work than would be afforded by other forms of counselling due to the written format, including taking over difficult situations when volunteers are

struggling without disrupting the conversation flow. Participants described valuing this graduated approach to training and noted that their confidence grew with experience.

Learning about Online Youth Culture and Communication: "Other people didn't know as much about Instagram or who's on it"

In light of the various unique opportunities and challenges of working online, the participants identified several areas of knowledge that they thought could support volunteer counsellors to train in this specific field. This theme outlines the various suggestions presented by participants to help volunteer counsellors understand the culture and communication of young people on social media.

Several participants suggested that general education around youth culture and mental health would be helpful in training to understand the context of service users' lives and general skills for helping with various issues:

> It would have been good to have more general training for [service users] that might not be dealing with severe mental health issues, maybe just they're feeling a bit sad. The training was quite well rounded but it was mostly about self-harm, which is relevant for the cause of the organisation, but might have been helpful to have more general skills [P5]

Participants also suggested that education around the reasons behind suicidality, rather than simply managing risk, might have been helpful for volunteers to understand and connect with service users:

> In training, there wasn't a lot of focus on understanding why somebody might be suicidal. A lot of people that were on my training didn't quite grasp why somebody might be suicidal [P10]

In addition, participants noted that specific education about how Instagram works might have been useful for the volunteers who were not familiar with the platform:

> Some people didn't use Instagram as much, so didn't know the language and stuff, they'd ask what some words meant. I don't know if it was just assumed that we knew Instagram, so maybe the training could focus on that, like give us an idea of how many people are posting or the response rates and stuff like that so you knew what might happen [P9]

Due to the casual, peer support approach to this work, some participants noted they would have benefited from more training in making casual conversation online, highlighting the importance of understanding online communication in particular:

> I think more conversational skills rather than just counselling skills would have been beneficial for me. Cause I end up doing word vomit. I find myself sitting there going 'this is such a simple message but I don't know what to say'. When it comes to counselling stuff, like when we start talking about problems with the person then I find my conversation skills are great, but if its small talk I find I don't know what to say [P3]

Given the need for counselling skills to be translated to the specific format of social media communication, participants noted that the provision of sample conversations between volunteer counsellors and service users using the specific format would be useful for trainees:

> When I first started I was going back and reading through the old messages that they'd sent and I found that really helpful. When I was waiting for someone to respond I would look through the old messages to get ideas of how to talk, how to start the conversation, how to flow through the things you want to talk about. So maybe more examples of real conversations in training would be good [P9]

These participants recalled seeking out previous conversations between volunteers and service users for ideas when stuck in their current conversations. They noted that it could be helpful to have sample conversations readily accessible to assist them on shift, further highlighting the specific need to understand communication specific to social media:

> It would be nice if we had some sample conversations to be readily accessible, cause we often search through and read the old conversations. They were really helpful, because you see how to deal users not responding, when it gets tricky or aggressive how to deal with that [P4]

This theme highlighted the value of understanding youth culture and communication on social media to support the development of counselling skills within this specific format. Several participants suggested that general training with regard to communicating online, mental health education, and understanding Instagram as a platform would support training and development in this area. The provision of previous conversations as exemplars in training was also suggested as a way to help volunteer counsellors learn to provide support on this specific

medium. Thus, this theme illustrated the importance of learning about online youth culture and communication, as well as consulting and empowering the ideas of volunteers concerning their training and development.

Needing Support and Connection: "You're going to be supported when you do this work, so it's okay"

Given the emotional demands and uncertainty of working online, participants spoke about the need to learn about and undertake this form of volunteer counselling in a safe, supportive environment. Participants spoke about the input from supervisors as a key source of support in their work and noted that due to the disembodied nature of working online, it was important for them to feel part of a volunteer community. This theme describes how participants felt that support and connection throughout their training and development helped them to deal with the uncertainty and emotional burden of this work.

The majority of participants asserted that they had valued learning about online counselling in a non-competitive, non-judgemental environment. Participants stated that they benefited from the establishment of rules about confidentiality early in training, which allowed them to feel safe to engage with the emotional content and share intimate details about themselves:

> Training was not a competitive environment. We're all there to help people so we're very supportive and it's a non-judgemental space. We shared some really intimate things that you wouldn't normally share with even close friends or family. It's a very safe environment in that whatever you say, it won't leave the room and that's the first rule that they go through [P5]

Although the counselling work was conducted online, participants said they had valued an opportunity to get to know their supervisors and other volunteers in real life during their training:

> I think the way they hold the trainings you get to know everyone and it does feel like a family pretty quickly and everyone feels comfortable [P9]

Participants spoke about how getting to know the supervisors and other volunteers created a safe space for being able to share, which provided a solid platform for helping them deal with some of the intense emotions associated with the online counselling work:

> The feeling of support and connection was there from the start of training. I think that's what makes it incredibly strong and such a great organisation and a great tool, just being around good people who know how to have supportive conversations. They're training people on both sides, we learn how to better support others and ourselves [P12]

The majority of participants described benefiting from a sense of genuine care and support from supervisors, extending to comprehensive debriefs before and after a shift, and an emphasis on group rapport in supervision to ensure that volunteers were comfortable sharing how they are feeling. These participants noted that this sense of comfort allowed them to feel mentally prepared for shifts:

> There is genuine, serious care about your wellbeing from all the staff. A stand out factor for me was supervision. They try their best to build that rapport in the group so that we're open to talk about what's going on with us. Beginning and ending a shift there is a thorough check in to check how we're doing [P10]

Further, some participants noted that they appreciated the emotional support and lack of judgement provided by the supervisors:

> I've always found them so helpful, it's never judgemental if you don't know what to say. They're really good to bounce ideas off. I think it's just really nice to have someone there in case things get really deep [P15]

Several participants felt that they could cope with the content of conversations knowing that their supervisor was there to support them:

> There could be some really upsetting, dark conversations. But you've got your supervisors there to help you so you're going to be supported when you do this work, so it's okay [P14]

In addition, some participants noted they do not feel that they are carrying the burden of this work alone due to the support of the supervisors and other volunteer counsellors:

> There's a lot of support, it's such an open conversation. If I don't know how to answer or tackle a situation I know that I've got the supervisor and other volunteers to help me. I don't feel like it's just me taking it all on [P1]

Moreover, participants described benefiting from a lack of pressure on shift to do anything they are not comfortable with, due to the empathy displayed by the supervisors:

> There's no pressure on people to do anything they don't want to. It's always been repeated if you don't feel comfortable doing this you don't have to. You can easily turn up and be like 'I don't feel like doing anything today' and they'll be like 'that's cool'. I don't know how they do that, but everyone's so full of empathy [P5]

Furthermore, many participants spoke about feeling protected by the supervisors. Participants reported valuing a supportive atmosphere where volunteers were able to decline to have conversations with service users if they did not feel comfortable with the subject matter:

> Supervision is generally really good, they ask at the beginning of shift are there any conversations you're not okay with having today. So even if you're having a bad day and you're wanting to have a lighter conversation, they support that. That's really positive [P13]

Participants also reported that given the emotional burden of the work, they benefited from supervisors checking whether they were comfortable conducting various conversations, and providing support following tough conversations:

> Some conversations could be triggering, but that's where the supervisors are really good, they say 'are you comfortable talking about this?' and you don't ever have to have a conversation if you're not comfortable. You'd always have support afterwards as well, you'd know that you'd be looked after [P9]

Participants also explained that the support provided by supervisors when debriefing, including the positive feedback provided, allowed them to leave a shift without carrying negative feelings with them:

> I think because of how we debrief, nothing bad has stayed with me. If the supervisors noted something that I said really well, like some of my reflective things, I take that away and keep that in my mind, I feel proud of what I did [P3]

Several participants spoke about how this sense of a close volunteer community and supportive supervision led them to stay committed to their work as volunteer counsellors:

> I've been there for two years and loved it ever since, it's just a really great community which has kept me there I think [P8]

Some participants described that a collective focus and sense of community, created in training, could be extended to the online space, where the volunteers remain connected with each other through Facebook groups:

> The community that we have is a real plus for us and keeps us coming back. I am able to feel comfortable with all the other volunteers and everyone's super nice. Even the Facebook group, we're all there, and we're all very supportive of each other, even if we haven't met before they do meet ups to get to know everyone, so that's really cool to be able to have that community [P5]

Participants noted that this online presence was appealing to the volunteers, who are mostly young people themselves, providing updates and encouragement through a medium where they are comfortable:

> They're very good at keeping people up to date, with weekly emails, video updates, and they use a lot of memes so they stay quite relevant and young. Most of the volunteers are really young so that appeals to them [P11]

Furthermore, many participants also spoke about valuing weekly emails and online updates that provide good news regarding the service users they have reached. They felt that these updates were important in maintaining their motivation:

> The updates make sure that everyone is still motivated and wanting to continue to help and go on shift. It creates a really good atmosphere and culture on social media. Every week they do a quick 90 second video, they have goals like 'we want to get 200 hours of volunteer hours this week'. They update us on the amount of people that we've managed to help, giving stats, which makes you feel good [P1]

Participants also described appreciating group events in person, such as award ceremonies and activities to increase volunteer commitment:

> They do lots of things to make volunteering more fun. They do award ceremonies twice a year and it's really cute. It's really fun, we do pot lucks and karaoke, dumpling night and bowling night, things like that [P3]

Given the disembodied nature of the online counselling experience, it appeared to be particularly important for participants to feel part of a volunteer community both on and offline. Each of the participants in this study reported valuing a safe, supportive space in training that allowed them to manage the uncertainty and emotional burden of their work. Participants also spoke about the benefits of feeling genuine care and support from supervisors and other volunteers. Participants described how a sense of community and connection was created online through Facebook and email updates providing inspiration and encouraging ongoing commitment by appealing to the younger volunteers. Participants also identified in-person group activities and award ceremonies as motivators to remain committed. Thus, this theme highlighted the potential to retain volunteers through personal connections, both in person and online.

Conclusion: Supervision and Training

Participant accounts suggested a range of experiences in relation to supervision and training. Participants described valuing a graduated approach to the training, noting the unique opportunities afforded by online work to conduct simulated conversations online, observe other volunteers, and consult with supervisors before sending messages. Participants emphasised the need to understand youth culture and communication online, and suggested ways to develop this knowledge in training, including further education about youth mental health and Instagram, providing exemplar conversations between volunteers and service users, and skills in communicating online. They reported valuing a safe, supportive environment in training and supervision, which allowed them to be open and vulnerable. Participants spoke about appreciating a strong sense of community between volunteers and supervisors, and how this could be created online with social media updates. This positive, supportive, and community-focused environment was the reason provided by many participants for staying committed to this work.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

This thesis aimed to explore how volunteer counsellors working through social media experienced their work and to identify the specific training and supervision needs for those working in this new field. This research aimed to provide insights for online crisis intervention services to deliver the best service possible for young people, and tailor training and supervision to best support and retain volunteer counsellors.

The internet and social media have become an indispensable part of life for many young people, resulting in their immersion in a new and developing communication culture (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014b; Ito et al., 2009). While psychological research has often focussed on the harms associated with social media, it has also been recognised to provide a range of benefits including increased access to information and connection to various communities (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Hanley et al., 2019). Young people have shown an increased preference for seeking support online due to the flexibility, informality, and anonymity created by this setting (Dinh et al., 2016; Hanley et al., 2021; Robinson, Rodrigues, Fisher, Bailey, & Herrman, 2015). There is a growing sense that crisis and support services must adapt to the digital preferences of young people (Bailey et al., 2018; Dinh et al., 2016). Understanding how young people communicate online is crucial for formal support services, as social media presents a unique opportunity to connect with this hard-to-reach population (Gibson et al., 2019; Summerhurst et al., 2017).

Young people inhabit a new digital world, with different expectations of communication and support provision, which brings challenges as well as opportunities for those aiming to provide counselling and crisis intervention in this space (Gibson, 2021; Navarro et al., 2020). Numerous service providers are adapting to provide online and social media based support for young people (Hanley et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2016; Valentine et al., 2019). Volunteer counsellors working online, who are often young people themselves, can

provide an important bridge to understanding how support in this area can be helpful for young people, given that they are at the forefront of this work and share the same cultural milieu.

Existing research has analysed the experiences of those providing volunteer counselling and crisis intervention in general, as well as the emotional and practical challenges they face in their work (Rek & Dinger, 2016; Taylor et al., 2019). However, the new opportunities and challenges presented by providing these services online using a proactive outreach model, and the strategies volunteers use in response to these, have yet to be examined. In this final chapter, I begin with a discussion of the findings from the three research questions that guided the research: working online: strategies for dealing with opportunities and challenges, the emotional experiences of online volunteer counselling, and training and supervision for online work. I then discuss the implications based on the findings. Following on from this, I consider potential directions for future research in the area. Finally, I outline the strengths and limitations of this research.

Key Findings of the Research

Working Online: Strategies for Dealing with Opportunities and Challenges

The findings of this study highlight a range of opportunities and challenges that appear to be specific to providing volunteer counselling within a text-based, online medium, and the strategies that the online volunteer counsellors used actively in their work to utilise and mitigate these.

In the first instance, while online counselling has commonly been represented as a 'second best' alternative to face-to-face counselling (Glasheen, Campbell, & Shochet, 2013), this research has highlighted some distinctive opportunities of working through this medium, from the perspective of volunteer counsellors. The volunteer counsellors in this study described benefiting from having greater control of the pace and rate of responding online, in comparison to verbal forms of communication. A sense of control online for both counsellors and service

users has also been reported by previous researchers (Bolton, 2017; Gibson et al., 2016). It appeared this sense of control provided distinctive opportunities for volunteer counsellors to use strategies including reviewing the transcripts of their conversations with service users and looking at their Instagram accounts to generate ideas for discussion topics, rapport building, and avenues for intervention. This greater control over the pace of responding also allowed more time for the volunteer counsellors in this study to think of what to say, and type and re-write their messages, which they felt alleviated pressure and anxiety regarding their responses. The ability to read back and reflect upon messages has been highlighted in previous research as a key benefit of providing and receiving text-based online counselling (Gatti et al., 2016; Paterson et al., 2019). Further unique strategies allowed by having greater control of the pace online included the volunteer counsellors consulting supervisors and other volunteers regarding the content of messages with no interruption for the service users. The volunteer counsellors in this study also described managing their responses to the content of messages received online better than they might in verbal conversations, as they had time to process their emotions. These findings reflected international research regarding the opportunity for more time to think about messages in a text-based online medium, with increased choice and control over when and how to engage on the part of both the counsellor and service user (Bolton, 2017; Gibson et al., 2016).

Another opportunity presented by online work identified in this study was the chance to take a casual, peer support approach to counselling work, in a setting most comfortable for young people. The volunteer counsellors in this study described seeing themselves as more of a peer support system than a counselling service and provided examples of using appropriate self-disclosures as a strategy to build rapport. These strategies contrast with conventional counselling practices, where strict boundaries are implemented to provide guidance regarding the nature of the therapeutic relationship, with a view that these boundaries help the service user and provider regulate their behaviour in ways that maximise outcomes and minimise harm

(Drum & Littleton, 2014). The findings of the current study suggest that there may be a gap between young and older people's approaches to distress and mental health, thus a peer support style delivered by volunteer counsellors online may bridge that gap. Previous researchers have noted this generation gap, for example, traditional perspectives considering suicide to be a mental health issue in comparison to young people viewing suicide as a normal response to emotional distress and pressure (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Malla et al., 2019; Stubbing & Gibson, 2019). The volunteer counsellors in this study felt that a peer support approach was effective and age-appropriate for their service users, and noted a reluctance to describe themselves as service providers but rather a sympathetic ear. These findings expand upon previous research indicating a preference of young people for online peer support rather than receiving information or advice, and the centrality of relationships in young people's lives (Gibson, 2021; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Naslund et al., 2016).

This research highlighted the need for volunteer counsellors to manage the absence of visual and verbal cues actively in their work. In a conventional counselling setting, visual and verbal cues are understood as central to allowing trust and mutual understanding to develop between the client and service provider (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014b; Harrad & Banks, 2016). Existing research underlines the increased potential for misunderstandings and miscommunications when neither the counsellor nor the service users can read facial expressions or body language (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017; Navarro et al., 2020). This study highlighted that strategies were required to convey listening and empathy to service users through words, using specific language, text reflections, and validating statements or phrases that volunteer counsellors developed over time. These findings align with previous research showing that online counsellors kept a set of standard text phrases and sentences saved to a folder to copy and paste into conversations (Bambling et al., 2008). The findings of this study also indicated a need to be more direct and clear when working online to address possible

miscommunications, expanding upon previous research showing that minimising the occurrences of misunderstandings is a key concern for online counsellors (Harrad & Banks, 2016)

The findings of this study underlined a particular challenge when providing text-based online counselling of distinguishing between genuine service users and those who may not truly be distressed or wanting help. It appeared that making distinctions between false and genuine service users was more difficult online than when communicating verbally or in-person, which reflects the existing literature regarding the heightened risks of misinterpretation and misrepresentation online (Navarro et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2016). The volunteer counsellors in this study reported experiences leading them to believe that service users could be disingenuous at times, as also reported by previous researchers (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017). Volunteer counsellors mitigated this challenge by examining service users' Instagram profiles, however, some volunteer counsellors noted that it felt safer to contact and engage with everyone who may be distressed. These findings expand upon the current literature, which identifies misrepresentation as a source of anxiety for online counsellors (Callahan & Inckle, 2012; Ersahin & Hanley, 2017) but does not offer potential strategies for mitigating this challenge.

The specific use of text language and symbols on social media was identified as an important strategy for working in the online space, reflecting existing research citing the importance of online language (Navarro et al., 2020). This online language presented a challenge for some of the volunteer counsellors in this study, as they noted struggling to interpret the meaning behind service users' messages. These findings supported previous studies that reported the need to understand the intricacies of online or 'text' language (Poh Li et al., 2013). The volunteer counsellors in this study outlined the strategy of mirroring the length, tone, and frequency of service users' messages, as well as their language, abbreviations,

and symbols used to build rapport. This need for matching and balanced conversations is supported by the literature for both written and in-person modes of counselling (Harrison & Wright, 2020; Paterson et al., 2019). This study found that specific language could be used online to convey genuineness and authenticity, as the volunteer counsellors described leaving in spelling mistakes and using abbreviations to show service users' that they are real people. This finding expanded on existing research that shows the importance counsellors place on conveying authenticity in text-based online work by identifying strategies for doing so (Gatti et al., 2016).

In comparison to the majority of services that rely on service users approaching them for help, the volunteer counsellors in the current study approached potential service users online to offer counselling. The findings of this study suggest that there are unique and added challenges for volunteer counsellors using a proactive outreach approach online, including explaining who they are, justifying their presence, and managing the suspicions of the people whom they approach. The volunteer counsellors in this study described understanding the suspicions of potential service users whom they approached, however experiencing sadness when their attempts to offer help were misinterpreted as suspicious. The findings of this study suggest that volunteer counsellors can mitigate this challenge by being friendly, upfront, and empathetic in explaining their presence to service users. While the need to be upfront and convey empathy when working online has been highlighted by previous research (Harrad & Banks, 2016), the current study underlines how this direct, empathetic approach can be used to mitigate the distinctive challenge of approaching potential service users online.

Ethical issues are acknowledged to be a challenge for those working in the area of online crisis intervention (Valentine et al., 2019). This study identified a distinctive opportunity afforded by working through social media involving the ability to examine service users' Instagram feeds to gain information regarding how best to approach them for initial contact,

build rapport and provide interventions. The volunteer counsellors described using service users' Instagram content as conversation prompts when initiating conversations, looking for potential strengths, and when stuck for topics to discuss. This strategy raises ethical concerns previously outlined by researchers, including those of confidentiality and data protection, respect for the autonomy and dignity of the participants, and valid consent processes (Hanley et al., 2021; Phelps et al., 2017). Several researchers take the position that transparent privacy policies regarding the collection and usage of user data are ethically integral to the design and implementation of social media counselling services (Valentine et al., 2019). While a key criticism of social media is the potential loss of personal privacy, social media also allows service providers access to information about a person that can intervene in emergencies and enable more tailored communication (Liu et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2020). Proactive outreach services such as LFT Chat present an ethical impasse in balancing the possible risks to privacy versus the benefits of reaching people in distress who may not otherwise engage with a support service.

A further distinctive challenge emerged in the current study of volunteer counsellors becoming distracted by the content found on service users' Instagram feeds, which led them to focus on that material rather than their conversations with service users. In a conventional, face to face counselling setting, it is common for environmental distractions to be minimised, with little use of technology required for communication (Wong et al., 2018). The findings of this study underline this key difference between online and face-to-face or conventional counselling, expanding on existing literature, which highlights environmental distractions including technical or connectivity issues that affect online counsellors' focus (Navarro et al., 2020).

The internet and social media allow people to communicate unrestricted by geography or national borders (Ersahin & Hanley, 2017; Navarro et al., 2019). The international reach of

online work presented specific challenges for the volunteer counsellors in this study engaging with service users, including language and time zone barriers, which required creative strategies to mitigate. The volunteer counsellors described missing nuances in the language and content when communicating with service users from cultures they were unfamiliar with, as well as conversations ending abruptly due to differences in time zones, also noted by previous researchers (Bambling et al., 2008; Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Gatti et al., 2016). The findings of this study suggested several strategies for addressing these barriers, including using google translate, taking a slower pace, conveying genuine interest, and targeting Instagram users who appeared active on the platform. These findings expand upon the existing literature by outlining not only the challenges of working within an international scope but also the active steps taken by volunteer counsellors to mitigate these challenges.

Further challenges of working online identified by this study were identifying and managing suicide risk online, magnified by the anonymity and international reach of social media. These challenges include increased difficulty reading cues of distress, providing local resources, or deploying emergency services with limited information about service users available on social media. This study identified strategies for responding to these challenges, including paying close attention to language and grammar when reading distress online, looking for changes in communication, and key words indicating hopelessness. These clues could also be found on service users' Instagram feeds. The need to be attuned to subtle hints and cues of distress for young people online has also been acknowledged by other researchers (Gibson et al., 2019; Nasier et al., 2021). The findings of the current study indicated a need to be explicit when asking about suicidal ideation in the absence of visual and verbal cues, expanding upon existing research showing the need for directness when communicating online (Dowling & Rickwood, 2014; Harrad & Banks, 2016). Extending upon this existing research, the volunteer counsellors in this study reported using various creative strategies when unable

to locate a service user to send help, including contacting people who have commented on service users' Instagram posts and searching their Instagram feeds for clues about their identity and location.

As discussed, several challenges and opportunities set online volunteer counselling work apart from other modes of delivery. The findings of the current study illustrate the distinctive opportunities of working online for volunteer counsellors to control the pace of conversations and communicate with young people in a manner that fits with their digital world. The findings also highlight challenges faced when providing volunteer counselling online and the various creative strategies required for mitigating these challenges. In particular, the findings indicate that many of the distinctive challenges involve the limited information and ambiguity created by online communication. Although these volunteer counsellors managed to mitigate these challenges through various creative skills and strategies, this required continued effort and hard work. These findings outline the inventive strategies that volunteers have developed dealing with the challenges and opportunities presented by online work, which could be useful for others working in this new terrain.

Emotional Experience of Online Counselling

In current literature, there has been growing recognition of the complex emotional experiences of volunteer counsellors and crisis workers (Hsu et al., 2017; Middleton et al., 2014). The online environment introduces novel elements that may not be present in face-to-face or telephone counselling, which are the most common settings where volunteer counsellors have worked. Existing research has recognised the emotional burden volunteer counsellors carry from listening to and empathising with their clients' experiences and responses (Darden & Rutter, 2011; Fleet & Mintz, 2013; Sanders et al., 2005). While there are similarities between the emotional experiences of counsellors working in conventional settings

and those working online, my findings suggest there are also emotional elements unique to the digital environment.

The findings of this study indicate that online counselling might reduce the emotional burden for volunteers in at least some respect. The volunteer counsellors in this study felt it was easier to manage their own emotions working online in comparison to communicating in person or by telephone. This idea has been reported by previous researchers, with counsellors identifying a key benefit of the online environment as emotional safety, due to reduced client emotional proximity to the counsellor (Bambling et al., 2008; Gatti et al., 2016). The volunteer counsellors in the current study acknowledged that sometimes it would be too painful for them to conduct these conversations in person. They also described being able to remain calm and professional online, feeling less anxious regarding crisis management, less of an attachment to service users, and feeling more able to focus on the content of conversations in comparison to verbal conversations. As the mean age of the participants in the current study was 20.2 years old, their expressed belief that it is easier to manage emotions online aligns with recent studies reporting that young people, in particular, more easily discuss sensitive issues online than face-to-face (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Ospina-Pinillos et al., 2018). The emotional distance offered in online communication might serve as a protective shield for counsellors working in this area.

The findings of this study also highlight the general emotional comfort that this, largely young, group of volunteer counsellors experience in the online world. This study reflected a preference for online communication for the volunteer counsellors both in their work and in their daily lives. Preferences by young people for online communication have been well documented by previous research (Best et al., 2014; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Naslund et al., 2016). The volunteer counsellors described communicating with their friends using social media, disliking telephone conversations, and being drawn to volunteer for LFT Chat due to its use of online communication. This base level of ease and familiarity that young volunteers

might have with online communication might contribute to their feeling generally more comfortable to deal with the emotional challenges of counselling.

Although there are some advantages that young counsellors experience in their shared familiarity with their client's online worlds, this also poses particular challenges. While the volunteer counsellors in this study reported that identifying with service users close in age to themselves helped them to relate to and validate service users, this familiarity also meant that they resonated closely with these experiences, often evoking their own unresolved issues. Some volunteer counsellors described guilt and shock at the social issues and privilege gaps drawn to their attention in this work. This finding expands on previous research suggesting that volunteer counsellors experience countertransference, shock, and guilt in their work (Christogiorgos et al., 2010; Howlett & Collins, 2014), and younger and less experienced volunteer counsellors are at a higher risk of vicarious traumatisation (Adams & Riggs, 2008; Howlett & Collins, 2014).

This study identified the emotional burden of managing suicide risk and self-harm online as a key source of distress for volunteer counsellors. While crisis workers and volunteer counsellors have reported this burden across numerous settings, there appear to be unique elements to the emotional experience of managing suicide and self-harm online (Macleod, 2013; McNamara & Gillies, 2003; Navarro et al., 2019). The volunteer counsellors in the current study reported a range of emotional reactions when communicating with suicidal service users, such as sadness, feeling flustered, overwhelmed, and disappointed. It appeared that the volunteer counsellors in the current study were fearful initially regarding asking service users' about suicide, which subsided with experience, reflecting previous studies indicating that volunteer counselling effectiveness has a positive correlation with level of experience (Gould et al., 2016). The volunteer counsellors in this study described feeling shocked by the graphic images of self-harm posted online, with the images remaining in their minds following

a shift. This finding expands on previous research focusing on the potentially harmful effects of young people viewing self-harm images online (Jacob et al., 2017). However, these volunteer counsellors explained they felt protected by supervisors and the emotional distance created by viewing these images online rather than in person, expanding on previous research highlighting the perceived emotional safety afforded by online work (Bambling et al., 2008; Navarro et al., 2020).

The findings of this study reflected a strong desire of volunteer counsellors to make a difference, noting that they experienced the most positive emotions in their work when they perceived a clear or positive outcome in their interactions with service users. Research suggests that making a difference is a strong source of satisfaction and motivation for volunteer counsellors and crisis workers (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Smith et al., 2018), and this was no different for the counsellors working online. There can however be challenges for volunteer counsellors in this environment in identifying when they have achieved a positive outcome for a service user, given the increased ambiguity and anonymity online. Despite the constraints of the online environment, the participants had learned to identify some indicators of positive outcomes, including developing collaborative action plans, service users' reports of tools or coping strategies working, and positive feedback from service users. It appeared that a sense of making a difference was a crucial element driving the motivation and confidence to continue in the work for the volunteer counsellors in this study. This finding expands upon existing research indicating that motivation affects the well-being outcomes of volunteer counsellors (Nencini et al., 2016), by providing ideas for markers of successful outcomes.

While many volunteer counsellors might be concerned that they are not offering enough to help their clients, the ephemeral nature of online connections seems to add to volunteers anxieties about their capacity to make a difference. This study shows the heightened restrictions and ambiguity that online counsellors might feel when providing brief intervention online, as

the volunteer counsellors described feelings of uncertainty and concern regarding the wellbeing of service users with whom they cannot follow up. The volunteer counsellors in this study expressed concerns regarding the higher risk of service users ending conversations abruptly online, with added difficulty in predicting how long conversations may last. These volunteer counsellors described wondering whether service users were still alive following conversations and whether they had done enough to help them. These findings build upon previous research showing that terminated conversations, a lack of client feedback, and single-session interventions affected online therapists' views on the effectiveness of their sessions (Harrison & Wright, 2020). For the volunteer counsellors in this study, feeling unable to engage effectively with service users was also a source of frustration and disappointment. These volunteer counsellors described running out of tools, fears of saying the wrong thing, and blaming themselves with feelings of failure regarding conversations they saw as unsuccessful. Such concerns have been reported by volunteer counsellors in previous research, again highlighting the value of experience as the current study suggested that these concerns decreased with time (Armstrong, 2010; Howlett & Collins, 2014).

Despite the challenges presented by online work, this study indicated several self-enriching impacts experienced by volunteer counsellors working online. In comparison to the more general reported benefits and lasting impacts of volunteer counselling in conventional settings, the participants of the current study noted changes in their personal social media use, with an increased awareness of the impact public accounts could have on others (Ramdianee, 2014; Sundram et al., 2018). The volunteer counsellors in this study also described their work facilitating increased self-awareness and self-care abilities, improved skills in communicating with and supporting friends, and a shift in their perspectives on mental health. These findings build upon the idea posed by previous literature that the decision to volunteer is part of a search

for personal meaning, enabling the construction of a positive or pro-social self-identity (Aguirre & Bolton, 2013; Smith et al., 2018).

To summarise, the findings of the current study illustrate the complex emotional experiences of volunteer counsellors working within the specific setting of social media. While there are some emotional protections afforded to counsellors in online counselling, some distinctive and significant emotional burdens need to be acknowledged. Although the ambiguous nature of online work helped the volunteer counsellors in this study to manage their emotional reactions to the content of messages, they still found themselves identifying closely with the struggles of service users of a similar age. It appeared that the increased constraints of providing a brief intervention online conflicted with the strong desire of volunteer counsellors to make a difference, as the findings reflect several negative emotions experienced by volunteer counsellors when they felt unable to engage with or help service users, or follow along with their progress. However, the volunteer counsellors in this study reported numerous perceived lasting benefits of their work, extending to various areas of their daily lives and their personal use of social media.

Supervision and Training

As volunteers staff the majority of crisis intervention services, understanding their training and supervision needs is of particular importance (Hunt et al., 2018b). Given the remote, text based nature of delivering volunteer counselling online, the findings of this study highlighted several distinctive opportunities for training and supervision in this space. These distinctive opportunities included the ability to simulate conversations with service users online, pause to consult with others during live conversations with service users, and observe the live conversations of more experienced volunteers with no disruptions for the service users. The findings of this study indicated that volunteer counsellors valued the graduated approach to training allowed by online work and noted that their confidence grew with experience, as

reported by previous researchers (Paterson et al., 2019). While the value of adequate training for online counselling has been highlighted by previous research, these distinct opportunities for training online have not previously been explored (Harrad & Banks, 2016; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017).

A distinctive opportunity identified in this study was that supervisors were able to take a more active role in the work than would be possible for other forms of counselling due to the written format. An example of the more active role taken by supervisors is that they could take over conversations when volunteers were struggling, without the service user's knowledge. Supervisors could also provide advice or ideas during the conversations with no disruption to the service user. These findings build upon the current literature, which has previously noted that text-based counselling allows for less interruption than it would by telephone when a change of counsellor is made or work is handed over (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014a). The volunteer counsellors in this study described this involvement from supervisors as reassuring, providing a sense of ongoing training. This active input likely increases volunteers' confidence, mitigating the challenge in training of facilitating volunteers learning to counsel more confidently (Hsu et al., 2017).

This study identified the specific need for online volunteer counselling training to include youth culture and social media communication skills. This finding expands upon those of previous research indicating that young people have well-developed online emotional literacy, likely developed by growing up in a digital age (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Nasier et al., 2021). To facilitate learning and development in this area, the volunteer counsellors in the current study suggested that services provide general training for communicating with young people online, youth mental health education, and understanding Instagram as a platform. The findings of this study also indicated that providing readily accessible exemplar conversations in training and on shift could support volunteer counsellors learning to provide support in the specific

medium of social media. These findings build upon the existing literature emphasising the need for specific training for working online by highlighting how an understanding of the specific setting of social media could assist volunteer counsellors to develop skills in this area (Mallen et al., 2011).

This study suggests that the disembodied nature of online counselling experience made it particularly important for volunteer counsellors to feel part of a volunteer community and supportive environment both on and offline. International research has highlighted the value of supervision, training, and connection to volunteer communities as protective factors from vicarious traumatisation and burnout for volunteer counsellors in general (Harrad & Banks, 2016; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017). This study indicated that a safe, supportive, and non-judgemental space in training and supervision allowed volunteer counsellors to manage the uncertainty and emotional burden of their work online. The findings of the current study also indicated that a sense of genuine care and community between volunteers, as well as volunteers and staff, could provide a solid platform for managing the emotional experience of the work, as well as inspiration and encouragement for an ongoing commitment to services by volunteers. This finding expands upon previous studies showing the value of a supportive environment for retaining volunteers and supporting their wellbeing by highlighting the increased need for connection in an ambiguous context online (Gilat et al., 2012; Mishara et al., 2016). The volunteer counsellors in this study described how debriefs and ongoing support from supervisors and fellow volunteers allowed them to feel mentally prepared for shifts, supported by current understandings that supervision can provide a facilitative environment where counsellors can process their responses to the work and develop self-awareness and professional boundaries (Amanvermez et al., 2020; Taylor & Furlonger, 2011). The volunteer counsellors in this study described how a sense of community and connection could extend to the online space through social media interactions and updates, highlighting the potential to

retain volunteers through personal connections, both in person and online. These findings build upon the existing literature by highlighting new opportunities for supervision and volunteer communities to match a growing digital medium.

To summarise, while training and supervision for online work share some features of more traditional volunteer counsellor training, there are several specific needs and opportunities in this area. The findings of the current research highlight several distinctive opportunities for training and supervising volunteer counsellors working within a text-based online medium, including simulated conversations, observing live conversations, and active input from supervisors with no disruptions observable to service users. There appears to be a need to provide education regarding specific online communication in training, as well as general education around youth mental health. Given the disembodied, ambiguous nature of working online, there is a strong need for support and connection in the work for services to retain volunteers. These findings also underline the importance of consulting and empowering the ideas of volunteers and those working on the frontline concerning their experiences, training, and development needs.

Conclusion

Overall, six key points may be identified across the findings of this research. First, the specific context of the internet and social media are critical in shaping the experiences of volunteer counsellors working in this medium. In particular, how the volunteer counsellors in this study experienced their work was shaped by the distinctive challenges, emotional impacts, and opportunities presented by online work. It is crucial for those working in this area to understand the new digital world that forms a central part of these engagements (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Ito et al., 2009).

Second, volunteer counsellors are not passive recipients of the specific context they work within, but active agents in responding to the various opportunities and challenges of

working online. The volunteer counsellors in this study described using numerous creative strategies in response to the challenges and opportunities presented by online work. In this sense, they presented themselves as being innovative, versatile, and flexible in the process of providing volunteer counselling online. These findings represent a new direction for training, recognising that volunteer counsellors bring their own resources and creativity to the work (Dinger, Jennissen, & Rek, 2019). Given their distinctive knowledge and expertise, online volunteer counsellors can be active participants in generating knowledge and development in this area.

Third, while a sense of emotional distance in online communication might serve as a protective shield for counsellors working in this area, there are also considerable emotional demands that are important to consider (Bambling et al., 2008). For example, there are heightened risks of exposure to graphic self-harm images online, as well as increased constraints, uncertainty, and ambiguity, highlighting the need for specific training and support in this area.

Fourth, given the increased uncertainty and disembodied nature of providing volunteer counselling online, there is a need for support and connection within a service. The volunteer counsellors in this study appeared to benefit from ongoing support and connection between themselves and their supervisors and provided this benefit as a reason for their ongoing commitment to their volunteer work. Given that burnout has been shown to affect the quality and effectiveness of voluntary services, and can account for a high turnover rate of volunteers, ensuring volunteers are supported is of particular importance to such services (Hsu et al., 2017; Jacob et al., 2017; Ramdianee, 2014).

Fifth, given the context-specific challenges and opportunities presented by online work, a completely new set of skills are required to support young people effectively on the internet. Young people have specific ways of expressing themselves and connecting with others online

and are experts at using this digital space (Gibson, 2021; Ito et al., 2009). As the specific context of social media is so integral to the emotional experiences, challenges, and opportunities presented by their work, targeted training and supervision are required for volunteer counsellors working in this area. A unique training requirement for this area is the need to understand the specific culture and communication of young people online.

Sixth, as the online context provides distinctive opportunities, challenges, and emotional experiences for volunteer counsellors, it also provides unique opportunities for training and supervision. Due to the written format online, there are opportunities to support and train volunteer counsellors through simulated conversations, observing live conversations, and active input from supervisors with no disruptions observable to service users. These opportunities for more active input may increase the confidence of volunteer counsellors, which has previously been a challenge for crisis intervention services (Skruibis et al., 2019).

Implications for Services

Based on the findings of this research, eight key implications for text-based online counselling services that employ volunteers may be identified. These implications could assist in the training, supervision, retention, and productivity of volunteer counsellors working online.

First, while existing research has pointed to the value of online counselling for young people (Hanley, 2012; Hanley et al., 2017), this study captured the unique skills and capacities required to undertake this work. Targeted training programmes could be created to upskill volunteer counsellors in these identified areas.

Second, specific training is required for volunteer counsellors to develop understandings of the specific culture of young people and their use of language online. The volunteer counsellors in this study described the importance of understanding and using distinctive symbols and code words that are popular with young people on social media.

Training for volunteer counsellors working online should also include skills and strategies for conveying empathy and active listening through written communication, as the volunteer counsellors in this study described developing specific phrases to convey empathy, and purposely leaving in spelling mistakes to show their authenticity. Previous studies have highlighted the value of using written, reflective, listening responses online to deepen conversations (Gibson, 2020). Further, as suggested by the volunteer counsellors in this study, services could provide sample conversations as exemplars of how to communicate within this specific medium, and could provide education regarding how various social media platforms work for those who are unfamiliar with them.

Third, given the challenges faced by volunteer counsellors created by the ambiguity and limited reach of brief interventions using a text-based online medium, training should include skills for managing this ambiguity. Strategies for identifying markers of 'successful' outcomes could be included in training given these markers can be less clear in an ambiguous online space, for example, when a service user agrees to a clear action plan. Debriefs following conversations with service users would be useful, as with other forms of volunteer counselling, to assist volunteer counsellors to manage the uncertainty that follows these brief interventions with the added ambiguity of working online. Psychoeducation regarding self-care and the limits of online brief intervention could be included in training, as the volunteer counsellors in this study described a strong desire to make a difference, and struggling when service users did not engage. Skills practices for addressing miscommunications would also be valuable, as the findings of this study showed that being upfront was a key strategy for addressing miscommunications, language barriers, suspicions from service users, and suicide risk.

Fourth, as the majority of the volunteer counsellors in this study were young people, it is important for services to acknowledge, as well as provide support and psychoeducation regarding the increased potential for volunteer counsellors to identify with the young service

users and evoke their own unresolved issues. It could be useful for supervisors and trainers to normalise and validate this identification with service users. Doing so may allow volunteer counsellors to sit more comfortably with the work when reminded of their own emotional experiences.

Fifth, as the volunteer counsellors in this study indicated that their confidence and flexibility in the work grew with experience, it is clear that retaining volunteers is crucial for the success of text-based online counselling services. Services can foster personal connections between volunteers, and between staff and volunteers, to increase volunteers' commitment to their work. Given the volunteer counsellors in this study expressed a strong desire to make a difference and achieve positive outcomes in their work, the recognition and celebration of 'success' stories may increase the commitment and engagement of volunteers.

Sixth, there are important ethical issues to consider when conducting a proactive service that makes the initial contact with potentially distressed service users. The provision of anonymous support to young people is a contentious arena, particularly where they may be at risk of serious harm to themselves or others (Hanley et al., 2021). Proactive online services must balance providing much-needed support to a hard to reach group with a duty of care for suicide risk. Clear protocols are required for volunteer counsellors to manage service users' consent and desire for anonymity while helping them to access additional or emergency services in their area where possible. In addition, the implementation of guidelines regarding gathering information on potential service users from their public social media profiles is required.

Seventh, given the flexibility and greater control of communication afforded by working in a text-based online medium, the training and supervision of volunteers can be ongoing, as supervisors can have input that is more active and the process can be more collaborative with no disruptions for service users.

Eighth, volunteer counsellors can be used as a crucial resource, with services facilitating their active involvement in developing knowledge and training in this area. Services could work collaboratively with young volunteer counsellors to develop training programmes and generate ideas for online services, which could provide critical insights from the expertise of those working on the frontline in this new field.

Directions for Future Research

As is the case when developing and conducting any research, several avenues remain unexplored regarding the experiences of volunteer counsellors working for proactive text-based online counselling services, as well as their training and supervision needs.

The broad focus of the current study on searching for themes meant that some ideas raised by the volunteer counsellors in this study could not be expanded upon in depth. As an example, it would be important to explore further differences between different groups of volunteer counsellors based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and culture. Previous researchers have noted cultural and gender differences in online communication (Twenge & Martin, 2020), and gender differences in telephone crisis-helpline workers' interpretation of suicidality (Hunt et al., 2018a), indicating that these groups may have different experiences and training needs. Further exploration of these potential diverse needs could provide insight for services into how best to train and supervise volunteer counsellors from various groups (Upadhyay & Lipkovich, 2020). In particular, there would be value in further exploring the experiences and needs of Māori volunteer counsellors, given the importance their unique knowledge holds in New Zealand and the need to find ways of engaging Māori youth who are less likely to use conventional mental health services (Martel et al., 2020).

This research suggests the potential for the online medium to increase the emotional burden on counsellors but also raises the possibility that it might distance volunteer counsellors from service users' emotions. It would be useful for further research to explore some of the

nuances of emotion in online work in greater detail. The notion raised by the volunteer counsellors that the perception of emotional distance online could lead them to forget that they were communicating with real people requires deeper exploration, as it raises the question of whether there are risks of becoming disconnected from the seriousness of people's distress. Further investigation of this issue could provide important contributions to the mitigation of risk in text-based online counselling.

To date, there is little research on services providing proactive social media crisis intervention in other countries. As this study used a sample from one particular service, further research could also interview volunteer counsellors working for similar services in other countries to explore potential similarities as well as differences based on the specificity of their protocols and training for this work. Such services, while few and far between, include Proactive Suicide Prevention Online (PSPO), a service based in China using social media to combine proactive identification of suicide-prone individuals with specialised crisis management (Liu et al., 2019). This expansion would serve the purpose of voicing a range of understandings, providing a view of different perspectives and contexts, and a fuller understanding of volunteer counsellors' experiences working online for various services. In particular, interviews with volunteer counsellors from different services could provide information on various training and supervision programmes and how these services could learn from one another.

It would be useful for further research to interview the paid staff and supervisors working for text-based online counselling services, who have first-hand experience of working with volunteer counsellors. These interviews could provide information on how training, supervision, and retention of online volunteer counsellors could be strengthened from the perspectives of those working for the services themselves.

Given the contemporary context, it may also be useful to explore how services

operating through social media work to adapt to rapid changes in globalisation and technological advances. It could also be beneficial to explore how volunteer counsellors experience these ongoing changes from their own perspectives. Such explorations would increase service providers' knowledge on how to support online volunteer counsellors in a rapidly changing technological context and maximise the potential of this new form of digital support.

Strengths and Limitations

In this section, I consider the various strengths and limitations of the current study.

One of the strengths of this research lies in the use of an approach that prioritises the volunteer counsellors' personal perceptions and experiences. The volunteer counsellors' perspectives as people with unique knowledge and experiences of this new and developing form of counselling are valuable in offering critical insights to generate potential implications for online crisis intervention services (Lykes & Hershberg, 2012). The utilisation of qualitative methods not only enabled this promotion of volunteer counsellors' perspectives and experiences, it also expanded our understandings of the context of the meanings they created. Moreover, the volunteer counsellors' own positioning as young people provided helpful insights into the digital world inhabited by youth and within which their counselling took place.

Another strength of this study is that with 30 active volunteer counsellors working for LFT Chat at the time of the interviews, 14 active volunteer counsellors were interviewed, as well as one inactive volunteer counsellor, equating to nearly half of the volunteer pool. While it was useful to gain a relatively large sample in relation to the volunteer pool size, the study aimed to gather theoretical insights into the experiences of volunteer counsellors working through social media rather than create statistical generalisability.

Further strengths of this study were the key processes such as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity, which established the quality of the current

research. I made ongoing efforts to ensure credibility by holding the participants' words at the core of the findings. I provided detailed information on the contextual factors of my research process to increase the transferability of this study. The dependability of my research allowed the current findings to be transparent, whereby other researchers could analyse my findings and understand how I produced the findings. To demonstrate the confirmability of my study, I employed reflexivity and transparency, including a discussion of how my subjectivity affected this research, and regularly challenging my personal views through discussions with my supervisor and colleagues (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Hill, 2015).

In terms of limitations, an issue with the sample is related to the make-up of the participants. The sample was predominately cisgender female, thereby minimising the exploration of any gender differences in the emotional experiences of online counselling work and any distinctive support needs between these groups. However, the sample reflects the demographic distribution of volunteer counsellors in general (Rek & Dinger, 2016). Additionally, there was no representation of gender non-conforming volunteer counsellors. Given the particular vulnerabilities of this group and the value their expertise could bring to a peer support model of counselling, it would be important to understand any distinctive emotional experiences and support needs they may have in this work (Helsen, Enzlin, & Gijs, 2021; Lucassen et al., 2018). While the sample included several diverse cultures, Māori were also underrepresented in the sample. Consequently, the identified implications for training and supervision may not reflect the needs of indigenous volunteer counsellors. Again, however, the sample aligns with the demographic of the volunteer population more generally (Hunt et al., 2018a; Rek & Dinger, 2016). Another limitation of the sample was that it was comprised of volunteer counsellors working for one specific service. Any particular service is likely to have its own values and approach and there may be limits on the extent to which this may be relevant to other services working in this area. In addition, the recruitment process meant that this study

has captured the accounts of 15 volunteer counsellors who wished to share their experiences and cannot be reflective of those who did not choose to share their experiences. Thus, the findings cannot be taken as representing the views and experiences of all volunteer counsellors working on a text-based online medium. However, representing the views and experiences of all volunteer counsellors working on a text-based online medium was not the intention of this research. Rather, this research intended to provide an exploration of how text-based online volunteer counsellors working through social media experienced this work from their own perspectives. As such, this study can be seen to represent the distinctive views and experiences of the online volunteer counsellors who did participate in this study and is therefore valuable in its own right.

As LFT Chat is a proactive service, some of the views shared by the participants in this study may not represent those of volunteers for text-based online counselling services whose service users approach the service rather than the service approaching them. Again, however, this research aimed to present a 'snapshot' of the distinctive views and experiences of the volunteer counsellors who participated in the study.

Finally, it is essential to note that my role as researcher has influenced the findings of this study. The analysis and findings of this study were interpreted and shaped through my background, age, gender, culture, and theoretical perspectives. These factors likely both assisted my interpretation by viewing things from the volunteer counsellors' perspectives, yet limited my interpretation by my possible attending to certain issues over others. As I was aware of my position as researcher, I took active steps to engage in reflexivity, using self-reflection and supervision to challenge my preconceptions. In qualitative research, researcher subjectivity is unavoidable, an important factor to keep in mind when reading and interpreting the findings and conclusions of this research (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Treharne & Riggs, 2014; Watt, 2007).

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, text-based online counselling is an innovative space, which presents several distinctive challenges and opportunities for those providing support online to young people in crisis. Volunteer counsellors are reflective and active agents who undertake creative, resourceful strategies to manage the various opportunities and challenges presented in their work. Volunteer counsellors can help to educate mental health providers about how to engage with youth in a digital or text-based environment. As social media and the online space continue to develop, there is a need for researchers and crisis intervention services to explore the unique experiences of volunteer counsellors and gain insight into how to best support them to develop skills within this complex online environment. This exploration is not only important for ensuring better practice among volunteer counsellors and meeting their training and supervision needs but is also fundamental to retaining volunteers and encouraging their ongoing commitment to the work.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Advertisement

The Experiences of Online Volunteer Counsellors

My name is Lizzie Fisher. I am a Clinical Psychology doctoral candidate in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland wanting to interview online volunteer counsellors who have worked for/are working for LFT Chat to find out about their experiences and training needs.

If you are:

- A previous volunteer counsellor who has moved on from LFT Chat

- A volunteer counsellor currently working for LFT Chat

We want to talk to you about your experiences!

Email Lizzie at efis009@aucklanduni.ac.nz for more information. A $50 voucher will be offered as koha

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 09/07/2019 for (3) years, Reference Number 023252

Appendix B: Zeal Education Trust Managing Director Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:

Zeal Education Trust Managing Director

The Experiences of Volunteer Counsellors Providing Crisis Intervention to Young People through Social Media

Names of Researchers: Kerry Gibson, Elizabeth Fisher

Researcher introduction

My name is Elizabeth Fisher. I am a student at the University of Auckland, and this project will be for my Doctoral Thesis in Clinical Psychology.

Project description and invitation

The aim of the project is to examine the unique successes, challenges and training needs of volunteers providing crisis support through social media. The project, with your permission as an organisation, will aim to examine the experiences of Zeal Education Trust (Zeal) volunteers, and to identify areas for future development and training in this field. This information sheet is designed to invite Zeal to participate in my research. Your participation will involve allowing me to discuss with willing participants their experience of providing crisis intervention online, and the training and supervision they have been provided. Benefits of your participation will include an opportunity for your volunteers to comment on their experiences working and being trained for your organisation. With your cooperation, areas of success in this field can be identified, as well as areas that may require attention or improvement. By identifying what volunteers found particularly helpful in their experiences will also potentially benefit future volunteers and professionals providing crisis intervention online, and the development of your online crisis intervention service.

We seek your assurance that participants' decision to participate or not in the research will not impact on their volunteer status or relationship with Zeal Education Trust. We also seek your assurance that participation or non-participation will not be impacted on their volunteer status.

Project Procedures

If you choose to be involved, willing volunteers will participate in semi-structured interviews, in which I will ask questions and flexibly discuss their experiences as a volunteer counsellor. This process will take roughly 90 minutes, but is not restricted to this time and could go longer or shorter if needed. The interviews will be audio-recorded, but even if volunteers agree to being recorded, they may choose to have the recorder turned off at any time during the interviews. Due to the sensitive subject matter, there is a chance that this discussion may cause volunteers some emotional discomfort; if that is the case, I can provide them with the addresses and contact details of local counsellors. Additionally, the Principal Investigator is an experienced Clinical Psychologist and will be available to advise on possible avenues of support should the need arise.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

Recordings will be made only with the agreement of those recorded. The recorded interviews will be stored digitally on a computer at the University of Auckland. Myself, and my supervisor Kerry Gibson will be the only people with access to this data. After six years, the tapes will be erased. Names will not be used in the transcripts, and documents that identify participants will be stored separately. I will send participants a transcript of their recorded interview, which I myself or a professional who has signed a confidentiality agreement have transcribed. Only the principal investigator, the transcriber and I will have access to, or listen to the recordings. If participants wish to retract certain statements, answers, or entire interviews, they may do so during a two-week period after reviewing their interview transcript.

Right to Withdraw from Participation

Participants, including Zeal as an organisation, have the right to withdraw from participation at any time without giving a reason.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

No real names will be used in the final Doctoral Thesis. Codenames will be used to protect participants' identities. As there are a small number of volunteers working for Zeal, it is possible that comments participants make may be identifiable, however, any no identifying details and circumstances will be included in the report in order to minimise this possibility.

The researchers are:

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For any concerns regarding ethical issues you may contact the Chair, the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, at the University of Auckland Research Office, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEEON 09/07/2019 for (3) years, Reference Number 023252

Appendix C: Zeal Education Trust Managing Director Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Zeal Education Trust Managing Director

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: The Experiences of Volunteer Counsellors Providing Crisis Intervention to Young People through Social Media

Names of Researchers: Kerry Gibson, Elizabeth Fisher

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and have understood the nature of the research and what my organisation is required to do. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to allow information about the research project to be distributed at my organisation.
- I agree that some of the current and past volunteers who are part of my organisation can participate in this research.
- I understand that they will be asked to take part in individual interviews, lasting about 90 minutes.
- I understand that potential participants will be free to decide if they wish to participate in either of these activities or not.
- I understand that participants will be asked to discuss their experiences, training and supervision needs regarding their work at Zeal
- I give an assurance that the volunteers' decision to participate or not in the research will not impact on their volunteer status at Zeal.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw my organisation's participation at any time if I am concerned about the process.
- I am aware that the researchers will provide me with a report on the research findings.
- I agree that the research may be published in academic articles and conference presentations at the researchers' discretion.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please send the findings to email_____

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 09/07/2019 for (3) years, Reference Number 023252

Appendix D: Interview Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: Interview Participants

The Experiences of Volunteer Counsellors Providing Crisis Intervention to Young People through Social Media

Kerry Gibson

Elizabeth Fisher

Researcher introduction

My name is Elizabeth Fisher. I am a student at the University of Auckland, and this project will be for my Doctoral Thesis in Clinical Psychology.

Project description and invitation

The aim of the project is to examine the unique successes, challenges and training needs of volunteers providing crisis support through social media. The project aims to examine the experiences of Zeal Educational Trust (Zeal) volunteers, and to identify areas for future development and training in this field. I would like to invite you to participate in my research. Your participation will involve discussing with me your experience of providing crisis intervention online, and the training and supervision you have been provided. Benefits of your participation will include an opportunity for you to comment on your experiences working as a volunteer, and a $50 voucher to thank you for the time you have given to assist with this research. You can also be reimbursed up to $10 for any public transport costs to attend. With your cooperation, areas of success in this field can be identified, as well as areas that may require attention or improvement. By identifying what you believed was particularly helpful in your experience will also potentially benefit future volunteers and professionals providing crisis intervention online.

Project Procedures

If you choose to be involved, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, in which I will ask you questions about your experience as a volunteer working for Zeal. This process will take roughly 90 minutes. The interview will be held either via telephone or at the University of Auckland, and we will refund any public transport costs to attend. The interview will be audio-recorded, but even if you agree to being recorded, you may choose to have the recorder turned off at any time. Due to the sensitive subject matter, there is a chance that this discussion may cause you some emotional discomfort; if that is the case, I can provide you with the addresses and contact details of local counsellors. Additionally, the Principal Investigator is an experienced Clinical Psychologist and will be available to advise on possible avenues of support should the need arise.

Data storage/retention/destruction/future use

The recorded interviews will be stored digitally on a computer at the University of Auckland. Myself, and my supervisor Kerry Gibson will be the only people with access to these interviews. After six years, the tapes will be erased. Names will not be used in the transcripts, and documents that identify you will be stored separately. I will send you a transcript of your recorded interview, which I myself or a professional who has signed a confidentiality agreement have transcribed. Only the principal investigator, the transcriber and I will have access to, or listen to the recordings. If you wish to retract certain statements, answers, or your whole interview, you may do so during a two-week period after reviewing your transcript.

Right to Withdraw from Participation

As a participant, you have the right to withdraw from participation during, or before the interviews, and once the interviews have been recorded, you can retract parts of, or your entire recorded interview within a two-week period after you have received the transcript.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

No real names will be used in the final Doctoral Thesis. Codenames will be used to protect your identity. As there are a small number of volunteers working for Zeal, it is possible that comments you make may be identifiable, however we do not include any identifying information or circumstances in any reports using this research data.

Implications for your Volunteer Status

Zeal have given their support for us to conduct this research and hope to use the findings to develop their training and support for volunteers. They provide an assurance that your participation or non-participation in this research will not impact on your volunteer status.

The researchers are:

Dr Kerry Gibson (Principal Investigator)

Email: kl.gibson@auckland.ac.nz

School of Psychology

The University of Auckland

Private Bag 92019

Auckland

Ph: 373 7599 extn 88556

Elizabeth Fisher (Doctoral Candidate)

Email: efis009@aucklanduni.ac.nz

School of Psychology

The University of Auckland

Private Bag 92019

Auckland

The Head of the School is:

Prof Suzanne Purdy

Email: sc.purdy@auckland.ac.nz

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APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 09/07/2019 for (3) years, Reference Number 023252

Appendix E: Interview Consent Form

CONSENT FORM: Interviews

(Participant)

THIS FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF 6 YEARS

Project title: The Experiences of Volunteer Counsellors Providing Crisis Intervention to Young People through Social Media

Names of Researchers: Kerry Gibson, Elizabeth Fisher

I have read the Participant Information Sheet; have understood the nature of the research and why I have been selected. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I agree to take part in this research.
- I understand that Zeal supports this research and has given an assurance that my participation or non-participation in this research will not impact on my volunteer status.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw participation at any time, and to withdraw any data traceable to me up to a specified date (give an actual date) / period.
- I agree / do not agree to be audiotaped.
- I wish / do not wish to have a transcript of my tape returned to me.
- I wish / do not wish to receive the summary of findings.
- I understand that a third party who has signed a confidentiality agreement may transcribe the tapes.
- I understand that data will be kept for 6 years, after which they will be destroyed.

Name _____

Signature _____ Date _____

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 09/07/2019 for (3) years, Reference Number 023252

Appendix F: Interview Schedule

Perhaps you could tell me a bit more about yourself… How were you drawn to volunteer counselling…?

I am very interested in hearing about your experience… How do you communicate with or understand clients online?

How do you form a connection with service users?

Could you picture someone at the end of the line?

What do you think is different about using a digital platform?

How do you read distress?

How do you read risk?

Can you talk about an interaction with a service user that was particularly challenging?

(What lasting impact do you believe that this experience has had on you?)

What is the emotional impact of this work for you?

What stays with you after a shift?

How do you self-care?

How do you use social media?

Can you talk about an interaction with a service user that went well?

(What lasting impact do you believe that this experience has had on you?)

What benefits do you think are unique to Zeal's service?

What challenges do you think are unique to Zeal's service?

What's the potential in this service? Is it transferable?

What was your experience of training like? Supervision?

What would you want out of training/supervision?

How do you think others might have struggled with training or supervision?

How has reflecting on these experience made you feel?

What could I have asked you that I haven't asked yet?

Appendix G: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Project title: The Experiences of Volunteer Counsellors Providing Crisis Intervention to Young People through Social Media

Names of Researchers: Elizabeth Fisher, Kerry Gibson

Transcriber:

I agree to transcribe the audio-recordings for the above research project. I understand that the information contained within them is confidential and I must not disclose or discuss it with anyone other than the researcher and their supervisors. I shall delete any copies that I may have made as part of the transcription process.

Name _____

Signature _____ Date _____

APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE ON 09/07/2019 for (3) years, Reference Number 023252