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## How Adolescents in the Child Welfare System Seek Support for Their Sexual Risk Experiences Online

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HOW ADOLESCENTS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM SEEK SUPPORT FOR THEIR  
SEXUAL RISK EXPERIENCES ONLINE

by

TAYLOR LEIGH MORAGUEZ

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Computer Science  
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## ABSTRACT

Youth in the foster care system experience unique and challenging situations online, such as higher risks of inappropriate messaging (e.g., sexting) and unwanted solicitations from strangers. As a vulnerable group of adolescents, foster youth often use online platforms as a resource to express themselves and seek support over their sexual experiences online. This thesis analyzes how foster youth seek support online for their sexual risk experiences, including sexual abuse, sexting, and sexuality. To understand how adolescents (ages 13-17) in the child welfare system seek support for these experiences, we conducted a thematic analysis of 541 individual posts made by 121 different foster youth on an online mental health peer support forum. The majority of the foster youth used the platform to seek support online over their traumatic sexual experiences involving sexual abuse (42%), sexting (31%), and sexuality (28%). Approximately 9% of foster youth used the platform to connect with others for sexting. As a result of seeking support online and connecting with others on the platform, they shared personal and intimate details about themselves and their experiences and, unfortunately, also encountered unwanted sexual solicitations while doing so. Our research highlights the importance of providing safe spaces for foster youth to seek support and advice regarding their sexual risk experiences online.

**Trigger Warning:** *This thesis discusses sensitive topics, such as sexual abuse and sexuality. Reader discretion is advised.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Approximately one in four teens are unintentionally exposed to sexually explicit materials online (Mitchell et al., 2013). Data from the Crimes against Children Research Center (2014) estimates that over half of youth experience more than one sexual solicitation online in the past year. The Crimes against Children Research Center defines sexual solicitation as unwanted requests to engage in sexual activities or talk or any request by an adult. Previous research has accounted for how adolescents have shared their online experiences with adults and parents, demonstrating how the risks online anticipated by guardians are typically lower or less severe than the reality (Wisniewski & Xu., 2017). When it comes to self-disclosure, people find it difficult to disclose sensitive information, like abuse, depression, and pregnancy, due to the vulnerability and stigmatization of the situations (Andalibi et al., 2018). This can lead youth to be more inclined to share and seek support for their sexual experiences, such as sexual assault, online rather than reaching out to a person present in their life. Adolescent online safety research emphasizes the risks that the general youth population are experiencing when they are online. Still, more research is needed to understand how more at-risk youth populations are affected when online.

About one half (48.3%) of the children in the United States (U.S.) child welfare system have had four or more adverse experiences, including exposure to parental divorce, death, domestic violence, family drug addiction, mental illness, and/or discrimination (Bramlett & Radel, 2014). The U.S. child welfare system investigates these child abuse and neglect instances, and provides foster care services for managing these situations. According to Turney &

Wildeman (2016), children in the foster care system experience significantly higher rates of poor mental health and physical health compared to youth outside the system. They are also more vulnerable to experiencing risks, such as higher pregnancy rates; yet, limited preventative measures have been implemented for this population (Oshima et al., 2013). Recent studies by Badillo-Urquiola et al. (2017) have examined the role of technology in these risk outcomes. Yet, more research is needed from the perspective of the foster youth themselves. Thus, to better understand what youth in foster care experience and share online, I posed these research questions:

**RQ1:** *When foster youth post about their sexual risk experiences online, a) what is the primary purpose of the post and b) what types of sexual risks do they post about?*

**RQ2:** *When seeking online support, a) what types of support do foster youth typically seek, b) with whom do they sexually interact, and c) are these sexual experiences typically positive or negative?*

To answer these research questions, we collected posts from 121 foster youth (ages 13-17) on a peer support mental health forum. Foster youth used the platform to seek support, advise others online, and connect with others for sexual experiences and disclosures. To delve deeper into understanding what type of support these youth are seeking on the platform, we have used the Social Support Behavioral Code (Cutrona and Suhr, 1992) to code each type of support these foster youth are seeking online (**RQ1**). We scoped the data to identify posts that used keywords at the intersection of sexual and online and used thematic analysis to understand the circumstances and sexual experiences these foster youth are sharing online (**RQ2**). We also

considered the different circumstances that foster youth were sharing online about their experiences, such as gender, age, and type of sexual experience. Foster youth often shared details of whether their experiences were initiated online or offline, who the experienced was shared with, and how the experience affected them, which allowed us to evaluate the consequences associated with foster youth seeking support online. We scoped the data to identify posts that used keywords at the intersection of sexual and online and used thematic analysis to understand the circumstances and sexual experiences these foster youth are sharing online (**RQ2**). We also considered the different circumstances that foster youth were sharing online about their experiences, such as gender, age, and type of sexual experience. Foster youth often shared details of whether the experiences were initiated online or offline, who the experienced was shared with, and how the experience affected them, which allowed us to evaluate the consequences associated with foster youth seeking support online. er youth were sharing online about their experiences, such as gender, age, and type of sexual experience. Foster youth often shared details of whether their experiences were initiated online or offline, who the experienced was shared with, and how the experience affected them, which allowed us to evaluate the consequences associated with foster youth seeking support online. We scoped the data to identify posts that used keywords at the intersection of sexual and online and used thematic analysis to understand the circumstances and sexual experiences these foster youth are sharing online (**RQ2**). We also took into account the different circumstances that foster youth were sharing online about their experiences, such as gender, age, and type of sexual experience. Foster youth often shared details of whether the experiences were initiated online or offline, who the experienced was shared with, and how the

experience affected them, which allowed us to evaluate the consequences associated with foster youth seeking support online.

Our research provides an unfiltered perspective on how and why foster youth seek support online for their sexual experiences. It provides the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) community knowledge about how a more at-risk group of adolescents, such as adolescents in the child welfare system, are seeking support online and how future developments of online safety solutions can contribute to the safety of these adolescents. Our study explores the variant factors in why foster youth could be seeking support online, as well as the risks that these youth are experiencing while seeking support online through thematic analysis. Overall, our research makes contributions to the fields of adolescent online safety, online peer support forums, and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). children welfare system, are seeking support online and how future developments of online safety solutions can contribute to the safety of these adolescents. Our study explores the variant factors in why foster youth could be seeking support online over offline, as well as the risks that these youth are experiencing while seeking support online through thematic analysis. Overall, our research makes contributions to the fields of adolescent online safety, online peer support forums, and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI).

## CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

In this section, we will be reviewing existing literature on the topics of foster youth and their relationship with technology, adolescent online sexual experiences, and online social support that adolescents are seeking online.

### Foster Youth and Technology

The existence of technology in adolescent development has shown signs of exposing youth to online risks at an early age. Findings from Badillo-Urquiola et al. (2017) have found that foster youth experience higher rates of being affected by the risks adolescents are exposed to online. Specifically, when foster youth are exposed to risks, such as sexting or sexual solicitations, they struggle to cope more with their experiences than the general youth population. As a susceptible and vulnerable group of adolescents, limited research has been conducted on how foster youth interact with technology and how to mitigate the consequences of potential risk exposure, as well as limited design practices in aiding at-risk youth in general.

Foster youth having access to technology provides many benefits, resulting in conflicting views on whether the benefits outweigh the risks. Technology can be an essential resource for foster youth as it can be one of their only means of maintaining and creating relationships as they are often transitioning homes, families, and places. The internet also gives them access to resources that can answer their questions or provide them with a platform to express and find themselves while gaining intelligence on how the digital world works (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2015). A positive correlation that was found between foster youth having access to

communication online is that they felt a greater connection to other people and felt a sense of “normalcy”, which they were typically deprived of (Gomez & Alford, 2016).

A major reason foster youth often have higher unpleasant internet experiences is due to their past or pre-existing traumas. The past traumas these youth experienced at a young age has often presented them with attachment and trust issues, resulting in online escapism being their outlet (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2017).

### Adolescent Online Sexual Experiences and Risks

One of the most profound risks adolescents experience online involves sexual experiences, including sexting, unwanted solicitations, and exposure to inappropriate content. A study by Jones et al. (2012) revealed one in four teens experience unwanted solicitations and explicit content online. As Razi et al. (2020) found from a peer support forum, adolescents tend to seek support, seek connections, or seek advice online when exposed to sexual experiences, such as sexting, sexual intimacy, or sexual interactions. The study found that 83% of adolescents sought support, 15% sought to connect with others, and 5% gave advice for sexual experiences.

When understanding why teens are reluctant to mention the risks they experience online, Wisniewski et al. (2017) found that teens often felt significantly more embarrassed or mild discomfort when discussing risks they experience online, often leading them to not communicate about their experiences with their parents in fear of being misunderstood or receiving a negative reaction. Dehaan et al. (2012), whose study focused on another at-risk group of adolescents, LGBT youth, found that it is easier for youth to reveal difficult information about themselves online rather than offline due to the awkwardness, sensitivity of situations, and the lack of

support they were receiving offline. Foster youth experiencing heavy feelings of rejection and the need for acceptance and love often results in them seeking it in different outlets (Badillo-Urquiola et al., 2019). When seeking support online, the option for posting anonymously can contribute to what youth are willing to reveal on social media since youth are more comfortable confiding their traumas and experiences when the experience is not directly associated with their offline identity (Andalibi et al., 2018).

### Adolescent Online Social Support

The types of support adolescents, including foster youth, are seeking online ranges depending on their current needs and emotions. Cutrona and Suhr (1992) posed that different stressful events demand different needs for social support, coining the Social Support Behavioral Code. This code has five categories of social support: informational, emotional, tangible, esteem, and social network support. The different types of support are classified by the social needs, such as informational support relating to seeking knowledge or feedback, or emotional support relating to needed comfort and sympathy. Tangible support was defined as physically providing services to another, and the code goes further to include esteem and social network support, which are messages that either encourage one's abilities and intrinsic values or enhance one's belonging to specific groups. Ko et al.'s (2013) applied this code to an online blog forum to see what types of social support were relevant. The most common support received was validation, encouragement, and compliments, which are types of emotional support. Similarly, an online forum involving sexual abuse disclosures also revealed this finding as it shows that posts mostly involved emotional support seeking behaviors, and tangible help-seeking occurred rarely (Andalibi et al, 2018). emotional support seeking behaviors, and tangible help-seeking occurred

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It is essential to understand the types of support that people are seeking out because if the support matches their needs and preferences, it improves their ability to cope with distressing events (Burlison et al., 1994). Teens turn to online outlets for social support to feel more comfortable when they feel limited talking to peers about experiences that may go against social norms and peer expectations (Ellison et al., 2016). This is because information that is disclosed may make the discloser feel more vulnerable about already stigmatized topics or lead to stigmatization from peers. Online peer support platforms empower youth to discuss the sensitive and uncomfortable topics (Forte et al., 2014). It is important to understand the types of support people are seeking out because if the support matches their needs and preferences, it improves their ability to cope with distressing events (Burlison et al., 1994). Teens turn to online outlets for social support to feel more comfortable when they feel limited talking to peers about experiences that may go against social norms and peer expectations (Ellison et al., 2016). This is due to the fact that information that may be disclosed may make the discloser feel more vulnerable about already stigmatized topics or lead to stigmatization from peers. Online peer support platforms empower youth to discuss the sensitive and uncomfortable topics (Forte et al.,

2014). lead to stigmatization from peers. Online peer support platforms empower youth to discuss the sensitive and uncomfortable topics (Forte et al., 2014).

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In this section, we discuss the data collection methods used to understand how foster youth seek support through a mental health peer support forum. This includes the data scoping methods used in the study, as well as the data analysis approach.

### Data Scoping

The original data scoped for this study were run on a SQL query to identify adolescents in the age range of 13 to 17 years old and whether the adolescents on the forum were foster youth. Throughout this study, the terms teens, adolescents, and youth are used to describe foster youth within the age range of 13 through 17 years old. The identification process of foster youth was done by filtering through the entire peer support forum for posts including the term “child welfare” or “foster care”. With this query, a total of 1182 posts were filtered, and through qualitative analysis and individually coding each post, 381 foster youth were identified from the posts by users explicitly labeling themselves as part of the child welfare system. There were instances where the identified foster youth posted multiple times in the query, which was determined by collected user data that contained user ids. Users from the posts that were not identified as foster youth were coded as not relevant to the study.

To receive a proper understanding of what these foster youth were sharing on the mental health peer support forum, all the posts from the identified foster youth were then collected, resulting in a total of 50,786 posts for analysis. Posts were originally dissected by observing what general topics foster youth posted on the forum, and various topics appeared. Foster youth had posts that involved seeking connections with others, asking for advice, telling stories,

venting, pop culture, and participating in trends, but posts about sexual experiences were particularly prevalent. In effort to scope the dataset down a reasonable size, an adapted process from Razi et al. (2020) was adopted to find the intersection of online and sexual experiences that these foster youth are sharing on the forum. The process used another SQL query to identify posts from the targeted foster youth that contained both online keywords (e.g., Facebook, Kik, Snapchat, message, send) and sexual keywords (e.g., sex, naked, nude, rape, abuse, touch) to narrow down the posts. The final set of keywords for both sections are shown in Table 1. The keywords were used based on relevant jargon used by the minors' posts from the forum, in addition to popular jargon used on other social media platforms. The dataset was finalized to 542 posts made by 121 foster youth. Posts were then coded for relevancy.

Post relevancy was based off the criteria of whether the posts were describing a sexual experience that a) either the foster youth or someone close to the foster youth were involved in, and b) whether they sought support for that experience. If the posts did not reach this requirement, it was coded as not relevant to the study. After the sexual experience was identified, the post was identified as seeking support (directly or indirectly), or else identified as giving support. Directly seeking support was defined as explicitly asking for help, while indirectly seeking support was defined as hinting a problem exists (Barbee & Cummingham, 1995). Giving support was defined by a similar concept. From using this relevancy coding, 356 posts were labeled as relevant.

Table 1. Final set of Keywords for Queries

<b>Keywords</b>
<p><b>Online terms:</b> Facebook, Instagram, Tinder, Bumble, Grinder, Snapchat, Craigslist, Skype, Hinge, Whatsapp, Kik, Discord, Messenger, Omegle, Vimeo, Vine, Tumblr, Myspace, 4chan, Reddit, forum, blog, video chat, Facetime, ft, message, dm, sent, send, pm, online, meet on, met on, webcam, gaming, cyber, blackmail, internet, AMOSC, f2f, LMIRL, block, email, post, tag, reply, share</p>
<p><b>Sexual terms:</b> Sex, nude, naked, flirt, STI, STD, grooming, LDR, predator, rape, solicit, dick, threesome, 3some, pussy, vagina, penis, cock, cunt, anal, clit, clitoris, thick, boob, breast, tit, nipple, oral, sodomy, finger, handjob, touch, balls, fondle, birth control, BCP, plan b, condom, #metoo, nonconsensual, pedophile, catfish, BDSM, bondage, dominant, sadism, masochism, lesbian, gay, cougar, smash, virgin, underage, minor, nsfw, make out, made out, sugarbaby, horny, LEWD, blowjob, B.J., friends with benefits, DFT, hentai, porn, dry hump, Netflix and chill, thirsty, TDTM, cum, sperm, semen, cunnilingus, dildo, ejaculate, masturbate, erect, fellatio, foreplay, foreskin, genital, hepatitis, herpes, homo, hymen, IUD, lube, morning after, morning wood, libido, hickey, lick, one night stand, orgasm, rimming, scrotum, vibrator, fetish, kink, explicit, picture, photo, prostitute, consent, abuse, trafficking, victim, pregnant, intimacy, hook up, beat, hit, ride, protection</p>

### Data Analysis Approach

An initial thematic analysis was conducted on the posts from the adolescents on the mental health peer support forum. Each of the 542 posts collected from foster youth were carefully qualitatively analyzed with initial coding, and later reviewed and refined throughout the study. The primary types of posts that were identified as relevant for sexual experiences were 1) posts seeking support, 2) posts giving support, and 3) posts asking another to sext on the platform. The final codebook dimensions can be seen in Table 2. Through the different types of posts, three major themes of sexual experiences emerged for foster youth:

1. **Sexting:** Posts that mention sexting or the act of participating in inappropriate messaging or explicit content.
2. **Sexuality:** Posts that are seeking support for sexuality relating to identity, sexual feelings, and attractions.
3. **Sexual Abuse:** Posts sharing their personal experience of sexual abuse, rape, and molestation.

The identification of sexual experiences and the type of support being sought for individual circumstances was important to code for to understand why foster youth are seeking support online. Since the type of post that was most prevalent was seeking support, other classifications in coding were defined to better grasp the situations the foster youth were experiencing, and how they sought to cope with these situations. The Social Support Behavioral Code was applied to the analysis to understand how foster youth sought support for coping. When coding social support, many of the posts were double coded for multiple types of social support needed as the needs differed depending on the different sexual experiences, and some posts requested multiple forms of support. Additionally, the perspective the different situations foster youth found themselves within the sexual experience, such as whether it was a negative or positive sexual experience and who the sexual experience was with, was analyzed. These codes can be found in Table 3.

Table 2. Final Codebook Dimensions, Themes, and Codes for RQ1.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Quotation</b>
<b>Post Type</b>	Seeking Support (77%, N=226)	Posts expressing the need for help or support.	<i>“he sent me nudes without me asking for it what should I do”</i> – 17-year-old Female
	Giving Advice (14%, N=42)	Posts that are offering support to other users.	<i>“You shouldn’t feel obligated to send nudes to ANYONE unless you want to”</i> – 17-year-old Female
	Asking to Sext (9%, N=25)	Posts reaching out to others for sexting.	<i>“Hey, I’m really horny and need to fuck. Leave kik”</i> – 14-year-old Male
<b>Sexual Experience</b>	Sexual Abuse (42%, N=42)	Posts sharing their personal experience of sexual abuse, rape, and molestation.	<i>When I was like 4 or 5 like around that age my brother touched me”</i> – 15-year-old Female
	Sexting (31%, N=95)	Posts that mention sexting or the act of participating in inappropriate messaging.	<i>“someone idk wants me to send nudes but I don’t want to”</i> -16-year-old Non-Binary Adolescent
	Sexuality (28%, N=73)	Posts that are seeking support for sexuality relating to identity, sexual feelings, and attractions.	<i>“I’m a 13 year old girl an I’m confused on my sexuality”</i> – 13 year old Female

Table 3. Final Codebook Dimensions, Themes, and Codes for RQ2.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Quotation</b>
<b>Social Support</b>	Emotional (42%, N=108)	Posts seeking support in the form of kind words, empathy, and listening to one express themselves.	<i>“please support this post it gives me all the courage and strength I need.”</i> – 14-year-old Male
	Venting (22%, N=57)	Posts that express anger, concern, or fear to cope with their experience.	<i>“DONT ASK ME TO SEXT OR SEND NUDES”</i> – 17-year-old Female
	Tangible (19%, N=48)	Posts seeking support that are in a tangible form, such as direct contact or messaging.	<i>“I would like to talk to someone please leave your kiks below”</i> – 13-year-old Female
	Informational (18%, N=46)	Posts seeking support to learn, ask questions, and receive knowledge and help.	<i>“When someone gives you oral sex and you don't consent is it still rape?”</i> – 16-year-old Female
<b>Relationship</b>	Stranger (32%, N=93)	Posts that mention a sexual experience with a stranger or trying to connect to one.	<i>“i have a habbit of sending naked pics to stranger”</i> – 17-year-old Female
	Partner/Friend (16%, N=48)	Posts that mention a sexual experience with a romantic partner or friend.	<i>“I want to have sex with my boyfriend”</i> – 16-year-old Female
	Family (16%, N=48)	Posts that mention a sexual experience with a family member, whether biological or foster.	<i>“I've been having sex with my foster dad”</i> – 16-year-old Female
	Unknown (13%, N=39)	Posts that do not mention the context of who the sexual experience happened with.	<i>“I was a victim of child pornography”</i> – 14-year-old Non-Binary Adolescent
<b>Experience Type</b>	Negative (79%, N=231)	Posts expressing a bad sexual experience associated with guilt, shame, fear, and other negative emotions.	<i>“For once I wish I could tell someone I'm bisexual without being judged and beat up for it”</i> – 16-year-old Female
	Positive (21%, N=61)	Posts expressing a good sexual experience, associated with confidence or happiness	<i>“is it normal to gain confidence when sending nudes”</i> – 15-year-old Female

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this section, we discuss the results of the thematic analysis of the 356 posts on the peer support platform from 121 foster youth.

### Participant Profiles

There was a total of 121 foster youth that were filtered based on sexual experience posts on the peer support mental health forum. The age range of these users were all scoped along the ages of thirteen to seventeen years old. In the study, fifteen adolescents had posts that aged out of the age range but were still applicable to the study since they began seeking support for sexual experiences before aging out. When collecting the user data from the foster youth from the forum, limited data was collected from the adolescent's profiles due to ethical considerations during the study. As youth shared intimate and personal details about themselves on the platform, it was important to conceal the adolescent's identity. The only data collected and analyzed during the study was the adolescent's user id, age, gender, and posts. This data allowed us to retrieve a general overview of the adolescents' situations. The demographic of the study had a reported number of 400 female users, making up 72% of the study. A total number of 92 users reported to be "Other" (17%), which are users who identify as non-binary or an unspecified gender, and the remaining 65 users (12%) reported to be male.

### Seeking Support for Sexual Experiences

The majority of adolescents who were identified as foster children on the platform used the platform as a way of seeking support from others. Generally, these foster youth were seeking support from any other users who were willing to listen and reach out based on their personal

and intimate posts on the platform. In this section, we delve into the different types of circumstances these foster youth were sharing with others and the different types of support they were seeking for their personal situations through thematic analysis.

### *Sexual Abuse as the Most Disclosed Sexual Experience*

Nearly half the posts described as a sexual interaction from foster youth on the platform were identified as sexual abuse (43%, N=125). Of the 121 foster youth in the study, 56 different foster youth sought out support for sexual abuse, rape, or molestation (43%). When it came to posts about sexual abuse, foster youth often put “trigger warnings” at the beginning of their posts to warn and protect others on the platform that their post may potentially contain harmful or triggering content to the observer. These posts showed a great deal of trauma and victimization when it came to their situations, and to reduce triggering the audience of this paper, many of the quotes in this section have been reduced. (43%). When it came to posts about sexual abuse, foster youth often put “trigger warnings” at the beginning of their posts to warn and protect others on the platform that their post may potentially contain harmful or triggering content to the observer. These posts showed a great deal of trauma and victimization when it came to their situations, and to reduce triggering the audience of this paper, many of the quotes in this section have been reduced.

### The Circumstances Surrounding Sexual Abuse

When conducting thematic analysis, the majority of foster youth reported to be seeking support for sexual abuse due to the experience being heavily negative and traumatic to the adolescents, showing themes of victimization. Nearly all posts disclosed a negative and harmful

sexual experience. When looking closer into the circumstances, 54% of the adolescents disclosed when the sexual abuse happened in their life, with 38% mentioning the experience happened before entering the Child Welfare System. The remaining 16% of foster children mentioned the situation happening after being in the system. With this in mind, the relationship between the adolescent and the abuser was closely analyzed; however, not every child disclosed who they were sexually abused by. The remaining 16% of foster children mentioned the situation happening after being in the system. With this in mind, the relationship between the adolescent and the abuser was closely analyzed, however, not every child disclosed who they were sexually abused by.

Based on the context of the posts, 52% (N=57) of the posts mentioned that their experience involved someone that the poster personally knew, whether that be a family member, a friend, or a partner. Out of those posts, 38% (N=41) of the foster youth reported to be related to or have a family relation to their abuser. Through deeper analysis, it was found that every family-related sexual abuse incident resulted in an explicit mention of an older male relative or family adjacent male. This included both biological and nonbiological family members, most often being fathers, step-fathers, and brothers. Other instances of grandfathers, cousins, and close family friends also occurred. Foster youth who were abused by family members showed signs of self-hatred, remorse, and heavy feelings of neglect over their experiences. Many of the youth felt disgusted, furious, and at fault for the abuse, leading to detrimental effects on the youth's mental health.

*“Tw: sexual abuse When I was like 4 or 5 like around that age my brother touched me and I'm so disgusted with myself I've never told anyone this before it makes me wanna kill myself*

*... I just hate myself for letting it happen, this is why I have a hard time trusting people older than [sic] me” – 15-year-old Female*

Following the relation of a family member, foster youth often mentioned their abuser to be a romantic partner, a friend, or an acquaintance (15%, N=16). In these situations, the foster youth also felt a boundary being broken between them and the person they knew and often were met with resistance when opposing the circumstance. The adolescents felt their partner or friend took advantage of them and struggled to cope with the emotional consequences. In many cases of sexual abuse like this, the abuser was often much older than the poster, resulting in a lack of control over the situation.

*“the main reason I started self harming \*Disclaimer\*... one of my moms friends son (N) came upstairs when I was alone... then he started touching me. I told him to stop but he wouldn't so I just listened to him. He tried to have sex with me but I really wouldn't let him I was 11 and he was like 15 or 16...” – 14-year-old Female*

A small portion of the posts were recorded as having an abuser that is a stranger (5%, N=5). Two of these posts explicitly were caused by meeting the stranger online. These posts often showed guilt and a sense of lack of control over their situation and often didn't know how to handle it. As a result, the foster youth shared their stories to cope with their abuse and seek support from others over their individual circumstances and the neglect they felt.

*“When I was five my birth mother left me everywhere she could. To gain money she sold me out, every night a guy came And sexually abused me... There has been so many times where I just want to kill myself... I'm on this app to try to get help but if it doesn't work I don't know what I'm gonna do.” [REDACTED] – 17-year-old FemaleFemale*

Like the quote above, some foster youth shared instances where mothers or other family members knew of the sexual abuse that children were going through, and sometimes facilitated

the abuse, and did nothing, most often if it was from strangers or their significant other. This neglect from their parents hurt the youth as they did not protect them. Posts that did not record a relation to their abuser were recorded as having no abuser (4%, N=4) due to them seeking answers about sexual abuse or having an unknown relation to their abuser (38%, N=41). Due to having limited information about each foster youth, which does not exceed what they share in their post, the unknown relation to the abuser is significant to the study as they could have any relation to their abuser. These posts were most often rehashing their abuse and displayed major signs of suffering when the abuse left them emotionally. abuser. These posts were most often rehashing their abuse and displayed major signs of suffering from when the abuse left them emotionally.

*“Why me ? Why bully? Why rape? Why try to hit me? I don't understand why u did it to me” – 16-year-old Female*

Foster youth who survived sexual abuse and shared their experiences on the platform all shared the grievances that resulted from the trauma. The trauma itself led the youth to use the platform to seek more answers and different types of social support from strangers online. Their posts gave light to the more serious consequences of abuse, such as depression and self-harm idealization.

### The Social Support Needed for Sexual Abuse

Out of the 125 posts that foster youth posted about sexual abuse, 86% of the post were seeking support over their experience (N=108). Each of the foster youth experienced different traumas and needs from their posts' situations, causing them to seek different types of support

from people online. Foster youth stories showed how most foster youth have come from very unstable households, which displayed more types of abuse than just sexual. Physical and emotional abuse were heavily mentioned in accordance with sexual abuse when they rehashed their trauma for online support, leading to the need of many types of social support. The support that was demanded the most from foster youth who survived sexual abuse was emotional support (80%, N=86). This often included that the foster youth shared their long, intimate, and personal story in the post, which expressed their relationship with their family, friends, and others. They sought to cope with their trauma and sought support from others with similar circumstances online to tell their side and encourage others.

*“TRIGGER WARNING ok im doing it anon because im scared of being judged and then i have to delete my profile... For a couple of years i lived with my aunt... her son [my cousin] molested me. He was 12 and it started when i was 5... my cousin kept molesting me and i had no choice to keep quiet or else i would have no where to live today i decided to share my story on talk life because im afraid to tell people i know today i still selfharm and im still addicted to drugs today im wondering what if im pregnant again.. thank u for reading my story pls dont judge im trying ” - 17-year-old Female*

A few users, like the one above, chose to remain anonymous in fear of the backlash that they might receive if they were identified. Whether the youth identified themselves or not, they all needed support from others online as they felt like they couldn't share their story honestly with those around them offline. Informational (18%, N=20) and tangible support (13%, N=15) were often sought after in circumstances where foster youth had unanswered questions related to sexual abuse and sought a support system from other users. This can most often be seen by foster youth asking questions about sexual abuse, facilitating conversations and answers from strangers. Informational (18%, N=20) and tangible support (13%, N=15) were often sought after

in circumstances that foster youth had unanswered questions related to sexual abuse and sought a support system from other users. This can most often be seen by foster youth asking questions about sexual abuse, facilitating conversations and answers from strangers.

*“When someone gives you oral sex and you don't consent is it still rape?” – 14-year-old Female*

Tangible support can be seen by foster youth reaching out to other sexual abuse survivors directly for advice and help. This gave these adolescents a private setting to discuss their experiences and make themselves vulnerable to other users online.

*“Someone that actually knows what sexual abuse and PTSD is like please message me.” – 15-year-old Female*

Posts that did not fit into these categories were adapted to a category of seeking support from venting about their individual circumstances. This type of post did not seek a direct line of support but rather used the platform as a resource to unload their traumas and difficulties. Many of these youth showed built-up anger, fear, sadness, and the need for a place to express their feelings, which is why they came to the platform to post. Many of these youth showed built up anger, fear, sadness, and the need for a place to express their feelings, which is why they came to the platform to post.

*“I am done u can't keep doing this anymore I hate him he got me fuking [sic] pregnant all because you raped me dad you got your daughter pregnant I'm 8 months pregnant after you beat me for 3 years...” – 13-year-male-year-old Female*

### *Foster Adolescents and Sexting Online*

A prevalent type of sexual interaction foster youth were experiencing while on the platform was sexting (31%, N=95). Out of these posts, 64% of posts were seeking support for the sexual experience, which included experiences of exchanging sexual images or messages, participating in cybersex, and/or explicitly sending nude photographs (N=61). To understand why foster youth were having these experiences online, we analyzed the situational context of each of these posts.

#### Encountering Sexting Online

The purpose of the platform is to seek peer support online for reasons such as mental health, yet on the platform, foster adolescents often encountered sexting for reasons other than seeking support. Foster youth who sought support for sexting had a 90% chance of seeking support for a negative experience (N=55). This was due to the foster youth, who identify on the platform as female, receiving unsolicited pictures from others of the opposite sex on the platform. The users that were sexting unsolicited pictures to these foster adolescents were usually complete strangers to the youth, making up 58% of the occurrences of sexting. These youth often had to mention they did not want to participate in these actions to other users and felt like it was necessary to mention due to the number of solicitations they were receiving. s, and felt like it was necessary to mention due the number of solicitations they were receiving.

*“Ima start blocking people. If you wanna sext? Blocked. Wanna ask me out when you don’t even speak English? Blocked. Want my picture do you own self? BLOCKED! I’m tired of it.” – 16-year-old Non-Binary Adolescent*

A total of 73% foster youth were victims of unwanted sexual solicitations online (N=45). These foster youth often did not know how to react given the situation leading them to seek support over it. Many of these youth expressed how unwanted the solicitations were but often still felt responsible for the actions of others when they did not participate or concede to the solicitation. This led them to feel conflicted when it came to falling victim to threats and peer pressure from sexting on the platform, leading to mental health concerns, but often still felt responsible over the actions of others when they did not participate or concede to the solicitation. This led them to feeling conflicted when it came to falling victim to threats and peer pressure from sexting on the platform, leading to mental health concerns.

*“someone idk wants me to send nudes but I don't want to but if I don't they will cut what do I do? if I send I fill hate myself and I will cut” – 16-year-old Female*

The remaining 10% of foster youth sought support over a positive experience with sexting (N=4). This involved youth who gained confidence from sexting and sought healthy practice and communication about sexting with others:

*“is it normal to gain confidence when sending nudes” – 15-year-old Female*

A few instances of sexting involved a person that the foster youth knew personally and closely. This included the adolescent's romantic partners and friends (34%, N=20). Foster youth sought support over these interactions because 95% of these posts resulted in a negative experience (N=19), as they were mostly victims of the solicitation. In many of these situations, the foster youth were seeking support because they felt uncomfortable with the person sexting them but found it difficult to express as they didn't want to affect their relationship with the

person negatively. This left the youth conflicted, resulting in advice being sought online from strangers outside the situation. . This left the youth conflicted, resulting in advice being sought online from strangers outside the situation.

*“...I really like this guy as a friend and maybe more and we talk alot on snapchat... he has been sending alot of sexual stuff talking about sending dick pics... and he did send me a pic... I don't know what to do because I don't want to get into that stuff with him.... I like him I really do but that will just make things awkward....” – 17-year-old Female*

The biggest themes appearing with sexting from foster youth was youth feeling conflicted or angry about unsolicited sexual advances online. This often led to youth feeling neglected and ignored on the platform as youth were using the platform for peer support. Strangers using the platform to sext individuals created an unsafe space for these foster youth, and other youth, when they are trying to express their difficult circumstances and emotions for support. n unsafe space for these foster youth, and other youth, when they are trying to express their difficult circumstances and emotions for support.

### The Social Support Needed For Sexting

When it came to sexting on the platform, foster youth used their posts to vent about sexting on the platform (40%, N=38). These posts included users expressing the harassment and insecurity they felt on the platform from others trying to sext. This often led to complaining that other users on the platform were using the platform as a gateway to sexting rather than a resource for seeking support or giving support to others. Youth, the majority female, found these actions to be revolting and led them to feel unheard.

*“Rant ish- I post about a guy using me for sex and then just replacing me with a friend and blah blah blah and I get about 5 horny [sic] guys send me messages on kik saying they will replace him. Oh god this app disgusts me sometimes!!! – 17-year-old Female*

Many users used tangible support (32%, N=31) as a resource to get away from users who wanted to sext and instead connect with other users who wanted positive experiences online. These youth explicitly mentioned how they don’t want to participate in sexting, and rather use the platform to connect with others and make friends to receive support from. When connecting with others online, adolescents usually included descriptors of who they would like to connect with based off age, gender, interests, and sexuality.

*“Add me on snapchat. I want some good friends for a change 📧 ages 13-18 pls, I don’t want or will send nudes”- 16-year-old Male*

Due to many users not wanting to sext, emotional support (17%, N=16) was needed by users who felt violated from receiving unsolicited pictures online or were taken advantage of when sexting. These posts ranged from users having their pictures forwarded without their permission to others to users feeling manipulated into sending pictures of themselves and receiving unwanted messages. These instances often expressed distress and trauma about the circumstance and blamed themselves for the sexting occurrence happening. Negative sexting experiences led youth to seek support over the mental health consequences of the experience, such as self-harm.

*“I’m getting blackmailed with nudes I sent 📧📧📧 idk y I sent them I hate myself for it I really do I regret it I regret everything I just wanna kill myself” – 14-year-old Female*

Foster youth who sought out informational support (14%, N=13) were asking other users questions about how to handle unsolicited pictures and/or how to communicate with others who pressured them to sext, and in other circumstances, foster youth also asked how to handle situations when their nude pictures were shared or distributed without permission. These adolescents asked for this information to learn more about navigating sexting.

*“he sent nudes without me asking for it what should i do now” – 18-year-old Female*

Social support from the sexual experience of sexting gravitated towards users seeking support over the different consequences associated with sexting and being online, such as receiving unwanted solicitations, mental health concerns, and contact from strangers. While it was found that some of the youth use the platform to connect for sex and sexting, the majority of the foster adolescents used the platform for support as intended. The improper use of the platform for sexting led many of the adolescents to feel disgusted, ignored, and unhappy as it exhausted them emotionally as they sought support.

#### *Foster Youth Expressing their Sexuality Online*

Sexuality made up 28% (N=73) of the posts that foster youth were seeking support for. The basis of these posts were that foster youth felt the need to express their sexuality and bring awareness to the shame and harassment they often faced about who they are. Sexuality in this section expanded concepts of the foster youth as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, and as adolescents expressing their sexual feelings, attractions and confessions. In this section, we analyze why foster youth are posting about their sexuality, and the type of support the foster

youth are seeking from their posts. why foster youth are posting about their sexuality, and the type of support the foster youth are seeking from their posts.

### Understanding Foster Youth Sexuality

Many of the foster adolescents who shared their sexuality on the platform did not feel accepted for who they are, and often shared how they were treated and felt about the unacceptance. In this section, 53% of foster youth posts expressed their sexuality as identifying as a member of the LGBT community. These youth often felt the need to express themselves because they felt unheard and misunderstood for who they are, resulting in the adolescents craving validation for who they are.

*"people on the internet keep saying I'm ugly and an attention seeker... And since I'm dating a girl, people are calling me a faggot. It's like nobody accepts that I'm bisexual...am I wrong for being in love with the same gender?" – 16-year-old Female*

The remaining 47% of posts showed foster youth confessing many different sexual experiences and questions online relating to their sexuality. These posts from the adolescents expressed sexual endeavors online to avoid the embarrassment and shame that comes with talking about sexual experiences. This involved using the platform as a resource to gain knowledge and advice about sex, particularly in instances where the foster youth were concerned about the consequences of their sexual actions, such as pregnancy.

*"So my boyfriend spent the night and we had sex before he left this morning but he didn't have a condom and when he left I was bleeding a little. I'm only 16 and he's 18 idk what to do idk if I'm pregnant or not." – 16-year-old Female*

In these posts, foster youth showed how their hardships and negative experiences led them to question themselves or their experience, and therefore, posted their situation online to find acceptance and clarity. Most of the foster adolescents shared a negative experience when it came to their sexuality (60%, N=44). Examples of this includes scenarios in the posts where foster youth were harassed and insulted for being in the LGBT community, or scenarios where the foster youth were worried about pregnancy or a sexual relationship. These scenarios often showed the foster youth in emotional turmoil over their situations.

*“Ugh why the fuck am I with you, you don't support me all you want is sex, bj's etc” – 14-year-old Nonbinary Adolescent*

In contrast, the remaining 40% (N=29) of posts shared a positive experience about their sexuality, sharing how they are comfortable with who they are and seek people who are in similar situations or have similar desires. These youth shared a positive perspective of themselves and who they are, as well as expressed and asked questions about their sexual desires in a positive way. This was foster youth's way of finding comfort in their sexuality and desires and connecting with others who would understand.

*“I'm 14 and when I tell people (on internet) I think I'm gay they usually say I'm to young to know for sure.. I'm already looking forward to the moment I introduce her to my parents, kiss her, look at her with a feeling of 'she's gorgeous', hold her, walking with her and touching her... So my question is: Can you know it at 14 or even earlier?” – 15-year-old Female*

The majority of the posts did not mention their sexuality relating to anyone as the post just described their identity and desires. Posts that did mention a relationship were likely to mention a sexual confession about their romantic partners, friends, or family member (21%, N=16). These posts were concerned with how the sexual experience would affect their

relationship with the other person, as well as the consequences of pregnancy. The vulnerability of the sexual situations often caused youth to seek advice from others on the platform.

*“Me and my brother keep having sex whenever my mum is out the house and im pregnant with his kid how do i tell my brother im pregnant with his kid?” – 17-year-old Female*

Overall, these foster youth used the platform to express their sexuality and sexual endeavors online to avoid the embarrassment and shame that comes with talking about their identities and sexual experiences. The lack of support and the lack of normalcy that these youth express about their sexuality can be more triggering to foster youth due to their past traumas and circumstances. To gain more insight to how these circumstances made foster adolescents feel, the social support they sought online was closely examined.

### The Social Support Needed For Sexuality

When seeking support for sexuality, tangible support was the most prominent type of support sought (41%, N=30), which included connecting with others with similar identities and desires and seeking answers to their questions in a more private and personal setting such as direct messaging. Examples of this include foster youth seeking tangible support over the process of coming out or about general sex-related questions. These youth found it beneficial to seek support from others who have been through the experience or at least understood how to explain their experience confidently to others. These types of posts often didn't include any personal or intimate details about their experience or questions.

*“I have a few questions about female sex stuff. if you think you can answer them feel free to message me” – 15-year-old Female*

Another type of social support that was prominent for foster youth seeking support over their sexuality was informational support (38%, N=28). The most active form of this was asking questions related to general sexual education. Foster youth expressed fear and a lack of understanding of their situations, which led them to seek knowledge from others on the platform to avoid the embarrassment of talking about sexual desires. This often stems from the lack of resources available to them from the public and the awkwardness that adolescents experience when talking about sex.

*“Ok friday me and my boyfriend had sex and I didnt really use protection... I dont know if he did finish inside me which will make me pregnant... I dont know Im a little scared... i dont know maybe telling it here I will get yelled at or something but can someone give me advice?”*  
– 17-y-old Female

A portion of the posts were found to be venting about their circumstances surrounding their sexuality (22%, N=16). These foster youth often felt disadvantaged for who they are and felt heavy emotional turmoil as a result. Anger and overwhelming emotions were prevalent themes of emotions in posts as they mentioned bullying, harassment, and unacceptance when the youth were fighting to be seen as normal. Venting online allowed them to unpack these emotions.

*“I hate f+×king people I make it obvious about my post that I'm trans MtF (Male to Female) and then this boy in my class says in front of the entire class he thinks I'll get my parts changed... f+×king people”* – 17-year-old Nonbinary Adolescent

The remaining posts displayed foster youth seeking emotional support over their sexuality (20%, N=15). Emotional support was crucial for posts that expressed emotional

distress about situations involving bullying, harassment, and feelings of unacceptance by others. These experiences with foster youth showed how the sexual experience or desire have made them vulnerable and how their vulnerability makes them sensitive to negative mental health situations, such as self-harm.

*“last night (during sex!!) my boyfriend told me he wanted to slow down sexually... I was so confused because he is always the one asking for stuff... He said he would stop but I just want to abuse the shit out of myself and doing that at least benefits one person...” – 17-year-old Female*

Social support sought for sexuality expressed how foster youth sought to understand their sexuality and sought to be understood by others. A common theme among these adolescents were how they felt different or like outsiders from the rest of the population, and this can tie into how they are also foster youth, which makes them a part of another minority of children. These posts also displayed how foster youth are eager to seek sex education and advice to learn how to navigate sexual situations. The platform is used as a resource for this due to the lack of support and resources these foster youth may have from family or people that surround them, especially with the shame that comes with talking about sex. These posts also displayed how foster youth are eager to seek sex education and advice to learn how to navigate sexual situations. The platform is used as a resource for this due to the lack of support and resources these foster youth may have from family, or people that surrounding them, especially with the shame that comes with talking about sex.

### Giving Support

A relatively smaller portion of the posts were from foster youth that were giving support to other users on the platform for different types of sexual experiences (14%, N=42). These posts involved public posts letting others know they aren't alone in their experiences, and also informing others that they shouldn't feel shame or bad for their experiences, and personally reaching out for them.

*“If your a teenager that’s experimenting with sex. Just a word of caution. Use protection. Live your life for yourself for as long as you can... Love to all ” – 17-year-old Female*

Giving support included posts about sexual abuse awareness, users encouraging others to not feel pressured to sext, and users supporting other users to come out and be themselves and their identity. Many of the foster youth posted about their individual sexual experiences, or their opinions on sexual experiences, and found a way to give support to others about them, no matter whether it was a negative or positive experience. Overall, these posts involved sharing a positive perspective or advice to others on the platform.

### Asking to Sext

A small portion of the posts from the peer support forum were users strictly asking others on the platform to connect and sext with each other (9%, N=25). These posts were separated from the other categories due to the posts neither seeking nor giving support to others on the platform but displayed risk with sexting with strangers.

*“Hey, I'm really horny and need to fuck. Leave kik and I will having you moaning my name(; I'm bi also.” – 14-year-old Male*

The results show that the platform is being used for other purposes other than peer support and are exposing teens to risky experiences, such as sharing sexual pictures and messages. This can be endangering as the youth can be approached by anyone on the platform that has wrong intentions or are overage, risking sexual abuse or other sexual experiences.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this section, I discussed the results of the study and how they answer our research questions. First, I addressed foster youth and the online consequences they faced while seeking support online and examined possible ways to mitigate these risks. Lastly, I state the limitations of my thesis and suggest improvements for future research.

### Foster Youth and Online Consequences

Adolescents in the foster care system sought support online through a peer support mental health forum to express themselves and find a place free of judgment and embarrassment when talking about their sexual experiences. The sexual experiences that appeared the most in foster youth posts were related to the topics of sexual abuse, sexting, and sexuality. Many of the sexual experiences these youth shared and expressed on the platform were personal and traumatizing, particularly when discussing sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. The platform was a place for the adolescents to post anonymously, to strangers, without being identifiable or a place where no one knew them. This allowed the youth to openly express their feelings and situations honestly and gave them a place to share their stories or experiences on the platform to anyone that willing to listen and give support. Different types of social support appeared to be sought by the foster youth when sharing their sexual experiences, such as emotional, informational, and tangible support. Many of the youth also sought support in the form of venting on the platform about their experiences, as they harbored resentment and anger.

The analysis of the posts from foster youth displayed how many foster adolescents shared their life stories online with numerous details of their personal traumas from before and after

being in the Child Welfare System, specifically in the case of sexual abuse. The majority of the posts shared an experience that happened off the internet and sought support over the experience online rather than offline. These youth rarely mentioned seeking out professional help over their harmful experiences, leading to the risk of improper support from others on the platform. The result of the adolescents sharing their experiences online caused exposure to strangers on the platform who often had wrongful intentions and exploited some of the youth through sexting and explicit messaging. The majority of the foster youth's intentions on the forum were to seek support online rather than connect with others to sext. Only a small portion of the foster youth directly sought to sext with others on the platform. The exposure to strangers and sexual solicitations online often led to youth seeking support over the experiences of sexting, as they did not know how to handle unwanted solicitations online and how to cope with unsolicited pictures. Foster youth sharing their personal and intimate details online also exposed their information to others on the platform, such as contact information and identifiable information about the adolescent unintentionally. on the platform, such as contact information and identifiable details about the youth unintentionally.

Previous research on adolescents seeking support online for sexual experiences showed differences in comparison when analyzing foster youth. Razi et al.'s (2020) prior research emphasized that the general adolescent population sought support over sexual experiences similarly, but in contrast, the highest percentage of the sexual experiences correlated with sexting online, with a very small portion of youth seeking support for a sexual abuse experience. Foster youth sought support for sexual abuse as their main reason for seeking support over sexual experiences in this study. The relationship between the adolescent and their abuser was another

apparent difference as foster youth mainly disclosed their abuser as a male family member while the general adolescent population shared low results of family related sexual abuse. These results show how foster youth's unique and challenging circumstances result in them seeking support over their sexual experiences differently. Foster youth shared sexual experiences offline at higher rates than online, which correlated differently in the previous studies, but emphasized the at-risk situations foster youth find themselves in and the reasons they are seeking support. Though the studies show large differences in the number of participants in the study, the correlation between the different sexual experiences shows the highest difference in the context of sexual abuse. Though the studies show large differences of in the number of participants in the study, the correlation between the difference sexual experiences show the highest difference in context of sexual abuse.

As a result of the online consequences that foster youth face while seeking support for their sexual experiences online, foster youth were exposed to more triggering situations online than they were initially seeking support for. Due to this, there are several implications for designs that could be implemented to help protect adolescents who are seeking support over their sexual experiences and traumas from the risks and consequences they are exposed to online.

### Implications for Design

Since foster youth shared distressing and traumatic sexual experiences online and exposed themselves to risks and strangers, several design implications can be implemented to increase adolescent online safety so adolescents and foster youth can navigate online without worry. While the mental health peer support has guidelines and monitoring on the forum to

protect adolescents from harassment and unwanted advancements, youth still have testimonies of these occurrences happening on the platform.

The implementation of safe spaces for foster youth to seek support for any situation they are facing, such as sexual experiences, would allow them a place to freely and honestly discuss the support they need without shame and with anonymity online. Safe spaces, in combination with peer support affinity spaces, are spaces restricted to adolescents who identify with certain groups, such as sexuality and gender, which would allow adolescents to seek support in a safer manner from like-minded individuals (Razi et al., 2020). This concept can be adapted further for foster youth needs as these adolescents experience unique and challenging situations due to their circumstances. Safe affinity spaces, especially for foster youth, can provide support, resources, and connections for their particular circumstances. This is the case since adolescents are more inclined to receive proper support and engagement when they relate to others with similar identities and circumstances, rather than finding it difficult if they can't relate (Andalibi et al., 2018). In addition, providing professionals, such as caseworkers and social workers, access to these spaces would allow youth to receive proper support as they can understand and help their circumstances. . This concept can be adapted further for foster youth needs as these adolescents experience more unique and challenging situations due to their circumstances. Safe affinity spaces specially for foster youth can provide support, resources, and connections for their particular circumstances. This is the case since adolescents are more inclined to receive proper support and engagement when they relate to others with similar identities and circumstances, rather than finding it difficult if they can't relate (Andalibi et al., 2018). In additions, providing

professions, such as case workers and social workers, access to these spaces would allow youth to receive proper support as they can understand and help their circumstances.

With these safe spaces, another implication of design would be providing youth access to trained moderators, peer support professionals, and health safety professionals that would allow adolescents to have full access to all their crisis needs and support without exposing the youth to outside influences and inaccurate information online. Foster youth often expressed difficulty sharing their situations with other people and often used the platform as a way to tell their stories for the first time, and this resulted in the youth not seeking the professional support they needed in their circumstances. This design would give these youth direct access to these resources so they could receive the support they need from professionals. This can be implemented by a direct messaging system with the trained professionals that allows an option for anonymity or through a nudging system that encourages youth to seek professional health if they express crisis situations. These designs can heavily aid in the protection of adolescents from online risks, harassment, and crisis situations as they have direct support from professionals quickly.

Another design that would be beneficial to foster adolescents on the platform would be the implementation of educational resources on the forum directly. This includes sexual educational resources for safe sex for all sexualities and information about pregnancy, as foster youth were commonly confused about these concepts and are found to be at higher risk of pregnancy. This can be implemented by a resource page for sexual information that includes details and resources for having sex and its consequences, as well as answering frequently asked questions the youth are asking on the platform about their sexual experiences. Other resources on the page that should be included for foster adolescents is education about different crisis

institutions that can aid youth in their situations. This includes crisis helplines such as The National Domestic Abuse Hotline and the Suicide Prevention Hotline. Foster youth disclosed many instances of domestic violence, neglect, and mental health problems during this study, and this oftentimes resulted in foster youth not seeking professional help over their situations. These adolescents disclosed instances of sexual abuse from family members and self-harm as their coping mechanisms for their situations, and educating these youth about these resources can help them in crisis..

### Limitations and Future Research

The analysis of this study was based on a small population of adolescents (ages 13-17) that were identified on the platform as part of the foster care or child welfare system on a mental health peer support forum. Since the identification process was based on keywords related to “foster care” and “child welfare,” there was a limitation of posts that appeared and were able to be analyzed. A future solution to this would be to expand the query to be met with greater results. This limitation appeared again in the study when the foster youth posts were filtered based on a setlist of sexual keywords and online-related keywords. This list could have been expanded to include more sexual and online jargon that could be seen in adolescent’s social media, but there is a limitation to keywords as some phrases are related to instances not associated with sex or online, such as using the word “fuck”, or “balls,” in a non-sexual sense (Razi et al. 2020). Keywords, in this case, would have resulted in a larger dataset with a higher rate of irrelevant posts to the study.

Due to foster youth being a more vulnerable group of adolescents, these results may not be generalizable to all groups of adolescents. Since this study examined how foster youth sought support on a peer support platform, this study does not evaluate all the risks and consequences that foster youth, and other adolescents, may face being online on different platforms and social media. The terms of service of the platform allowed the use of user data for research, but the safety of the foster adolescents' privacy and identity was of high importance. Analyzing foster children's data often resulted in collecting sensitive personal information that could put the youth in jeopardy, which emphasized the importance of keeping the adolescent's identity private, anonymous, and non-searchable throughout the study (Badillo-Urquiola, 2017). As a result of evaluating foster youth posts and the platform being for peer support, we likely encounter higher rates of negative posts and responses from the foster youth since their purpose is to seek help over their situations.

Another limitation to the study was that the majority of the foster youth in this study reported to identify as female on the platform. This was a limitation as the analysis of this study was biased on the perspective of female foster youth's sexual experiences and support seeking behaviors. Male identified and non-binary foster youth perspectives were more limited in the study as they sought support over sexual experiences less on the peer support platform. This limitation is common in related research as male individuals are less likely to disclose and seek support over sexual experiences (Palmer et al., 2021). In addition, Allen et al. (2015) found that the rate of males experiencing sexual assault and unwanted sexual activity is less than half of what females face and disclose. The reasons attributed to these statistics are related to males facing greater barriers to reporting unwanted sexual activity, such as social perceptions and

expectations. These cultural factors of social expectations include gendered social display of emotions, non-victimization thinking of men, homophobia, and negative views associated with help seeking (Palmer et al., 2021). Male victims of sexual assault are understudied in comparison to female victims in adults (Peterson et al., 2011), resulting in more research needed to understand the perspective of male sexual assault victims. Future research relating to this can be expanded by analyzing a greater number of male foster youth's sexual experiences and support seeking behaviors. include gendered social display of emotions, non-victimization thinking of men, homophobia, and negative views associated with help seeking (Palmer et al., 2021). Male victims of sexual assault are understudied in comparison to of female victims in adults (Peterson et al, 2011), resulting in more research needed to understand the perspective of male sexual assault victims. Future research relating to this can be expanded by analyzing a greater number of male foster youth sexual experiences and support seeking behaviors.

When analyzing the type of support and social support the foster youth were seeking, we strictly analyzed what the youth wanted rather than the response and actual support they received from other individuals on the platform. A way to expand this research would be to evaluate the responses and the types of support the youth got in response to their needs, stories, and sexual experiences.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Sexual interactions and experiences were highly present online in the lives of foster youth on the mental health peer support platform, correlating to the reasons the adolescents in the child welfare system were seeking support online. The foster youth using technology showed benefits of them being online as it was a tool for them to seek support and connect with others in similar situations and experiences. The majority of the foster youth used the online platform as a source of support over their sexual experiences, which many found to be traumatic and difficult to cope with. These foster adolescents shared many of their high-risk sexual situations they were seeking support for, with the majority of them seeking support for an incident related to sexual abuse. Along with the benefits of foster adolescents seeking support online, foster youth faced many high-risk situations while being online, such as unwanted solicitations from strangers on the platform. These sexual experiences resulted in the youth seeking support for different social support needs. Only a small portion of youth actively sought out professional help over their situations and used the platform as a substitute to share their story for the first time to seek support. seeking support online, foster youth faced many high-risk situations while being online, such as unwanted solicitations from strangers on the platform. These sexual experiences resulted in the youth seeking support for different social support needs. Only a small portion of youth actively sought out professional help over their situations and used the platform as substitute to share their story for the first time to seek support.

As foster youth are a vulnerable group of adolescents who often face unique and challenging situations due to their circumstances, a key takeaway from this study is that

adolescents would benefit from additional resources and support systems online and offline that would help them remain safe online, such as sex education and online safety designs for support. A prevalent theme that was displayed throughout the study was foster youth struggling to cope with and handle their sexual experiences, as well as needing advice and answers to their sexual situations. Sexual education would aid foster adolescents in understanding sex to a greater extent and make them more comfortable with the conversation of sex. Along with sexual education, teaching adolescents how to navigate online through sexual solicitations and other risks safely would help foster youth remain safe online while seeking support. Easily accessible professional help online for foster adolescents can also help these youth in crisis situations. This would allow these youth to receive the proper support they need to cope with their circumstances. would help foster youth remain safe online while seeking support. Easily accessible professional help online for foster adolescents can also help these youth in crisis situations. This would allow these youth to receive the proper support they need to cope with their circumstances.

While conducting this research, foster adolescents shared personal, detailed, and triggering life stories in a non-censored perspective. As a researcher who analyzed all these posts in the study, I personally found it difficult to grasp and read the experiences these youth were sharing online, specifically in the case of sexual abuse. Analyzing these stories from this perspective was harsh on my mental health, so for the safety of myself and my mental health, it was important for me to take breaks and separate myself from this research at times. This caused the analysis of this data and research to extend longer than expected overall, but it was important to take breaks and focus on myself as my goal was to help these adolescents with this paper. The difficulty that came with reading these traumatic experiences emphasizes the need to help foster

adolescents in these situations, and understanding their situations can aid in keeping them safe online.

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