

## Article

# Supporters with Vantage Position: The Role of Youth Work in the Online Lifeworld from the Perspective of Adolescents and Youth Work's Partners

Dejan Todorović <sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Josje van der Linden <sup>2</sup> , Stijn Sieckelincx <sup>1</sup> and Margaretha Christina Timmerman <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Applied Research in Social Work and Law, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, 1000 BA Amsterdam, The Netherlands; s.sieckelincx@hva.nl

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, 9700 AB Groningen, The Netherlands; c.j.van.der.linden@rug.nl (J.v.d.L.); m.c.timmerman@rug.nl (M.C.T.)

\* Correspondence: d.todorovic@hva.nl

**Abstract:** The online environment, where the boundaries between the domains of home, school, work, and leisure are blurred, poses new challenges for youth work practice. Due to limited research on this subject matter, the theoretical underpinnings of the online youth work practice are constrained. The fulfilment of youth work's aims online, the position it can take in the online context, and its relation to its partners in the online lifeworld need a theoretical base. This paper seeks to analyse the role of youth work in the online lifeworld according to adolescents and youth work's partners. The research was conducted in the Netherlands in collaboration with 14 youth work organisations. A qualitative research design was used: group conversations with young people and semi-structured interviews with youth work's partners (i.e., parents, schools, informal networks, neighbourhood support teams, police, and municipal officials). The findings indicate that youth work in the online lifeworld, according to the respondents, is part of the general youth work practice, with a primary role of addressing the developmental needs of young people and creating new developmental opportunities. This role is expected to be fulfilled by engaging and connecting with young people in the online lifeworld and providing them instrumental, informational, socioemotional, and cognitive support. To do so, according to the partners, youth workers can make use of their vantage position in the online relationship with adolescents in order to access online information relevant for support and prudent prevention aimed at adolescents' development. This vantage position may potentially encourage a collaboration between young people and partners, and between the online and offline youth work practice.

**Keywords:** online youth work; online lifeworld; vulnerable adolescents; collaboration



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## 1. Introduction

For a while now, a significant part of young people's interactions and activities has been occurring online [1]. Consequently, the role of youth work in the digital lives of young individuals has gained importance, a trend further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a deficiency in understanding the precise role of youth work in an online context. Blurred boundaries between the online lifeworld and the domains of home, school, work, and leisure pose new challenges for youth work practice in fulfilling its mission in an online context [2]. The role of youth work in relation to its partners, such as parents, schools, social services, police, municipalities, and informal networks of young people, needs rethinking. The research question for this paper reads: What role in the online lifeworld is expected from youth work by adolescents and youth work's partners?

In this study, we addressed this question through conducting group conversations with young people and semi-structured interviews with partners involved in youth work. Prior to delving into our methodology and findings, we provide an overview of the literature on

the online lifeworld of young people, on offline and online youth work practice, as well as on the collaborative engagements between youth work and its partners.

### *1.1. Online Lifeworld of Young People*

The term ‘online lifeworld’ refers to all the experiences (e.g., memories, feelings, sense of belonging, and making connections with peers) that young people have when they are connected to the Internet. In that respect, the online lifeworld is more than just a medium for communication and interaction. It is an environment that shapes young people’s daily activities, gives them a sense of belonging, and provides a territory for validating their identities, making friendships, connections, and intimacy with peers [3,4]. Some of the previous empirical studies, which are more focused on the risks of the online context (see for example [5,6]), suggest that the online environment offers young individuals opportunities for gaining experiences and shaping their identities, while also serving as a space that can increase vulnerabilities and risks. A characteristic of the online lifeworld of young people is that this phenomenon does not stand alone, but must be seen in a relation to the offline lifeworld [7]. The online and offline lifeworld intertwine where the private domain becomes public space and public space enters the private domain [8,9]. Also, the online lifeworld is not exclusively a domain of young people [7]. It simultaneously includes young people and adults. Parents have accounts on social media, they share TV streaming accounts with their children, and schools use online resources and tools for online education [7]. This hybrid environment where online and offline worlds are intertwined, and where young people interact with peers, adults, and digital media and tools, fundamentally shapes young people’s development, behaviour, and social life [10,11].

### *1.2. Youth Work in the Offline and Online Lifeworld*

Across the world, youth work is defined by various practice features using different theoretical frameworks [12]. In the Netherlands, youth work belongs to the social work profession, with a focus on supporting young people between 10 and 23 years of age towards adulthood [13,14]. Youth work takes place in the setting where young people are in their lifeworld [15]. In this lifeworld, youth workers build meaningful relationships with young people [16,17] and respond to their developmental needs [18]. Youth work provides spaces and places for young people to express themselves, to meet peers, and to learn new skills and attitudes, especially for those from socially deprived and marginalised groups [13,19,20].

The literature suggests that online youth work is regarded as a fundamental component of the overall youth work practice, where digital media and technology are acknowledged and actively employed [21]. This use of digital media and technology is evidenced in a study [22] where youth workers perceive it as enhancing their overall practice. The aims and target group in this context align with those of offline youth work practice [23]. As an integral part of the overall youth work practice, youth work in the online lifeworld is not seen as a one-way information-sending method, but rather as a two-way process of engagement in young people’s lifeworld, which involves stimulating and influencing interactions, actions, and connections of adolescents, and responding to their developmental needs [23,24]. It represents a dynamic and ever-changing practice influenced by the intersectionality of various factors and actors, encompassing both social and technological dimensions [25]. In this respect, youth work in the online lifeworld is not just expected to use social and digital media for the dissemination of information and for the instruction of adolescents in the use of new digital tools, platforms, and media (i.e., media literacy and media education), or for the implementation of online youth care interventions. In fact, online youth work methods, in conjunction with these online educational tools or online interventions, may also be used for a variety of developmental needs and adolescent issues (e.g., dealing with online risks, peer interactions, and talent development). With the online opportunities, youth workers may reach a broader target group, and also some specific ones—e.g., adolescents from rural areas with weak support in their social environment,

adolescents with a migration background, and minority groups [13]. Thus, ambitions and problems of young people can be identified and tackled at an early stage, possibly with other pedagogical actors in the online lifeworld [26].

### *1.3. Youth Work's Collaboration with Partners*

Depending on the circumstances and issues in which young people are involved (e.g., addiction, domestic violence, and behavioural and cognitive problems), the role of youth work can be limited and collaboration with partners is needed [27]. In this collaboration, youth work has a bridging function between adolescents, adults, and institutions. This bridging function reinforces a supportive and strong pedagogical environment for disadvantaged young people [26]. Collaboration with parents may be necessary to gain support and involvement in young people's development, gain insight into the home situation, or resolve domestic problems [28,29]. Collaboration with schools, social services, and municipalities can be important for identifying and addressing impending or incipient problems, and directing young people to appropriate support [30,31]. Collaboration with the police is needed for the protection of young people, for example, in cases of aggression and abuse, and as a reaction to nuisance, transgressive behaviour, radicalisation, and crime [32]. Lastly, youth work collaborates with young people's informal networks. Informal networks include individuals from the immediate environment of young people (e.g., peers, neighbours, local entrepreneurs, and sports associations) who also have an impact on their development. Collaboration with these individuals is therefore needed as it can play a meaningful role in supporting and enhancing the positive development of young people [33]. Depending on developmental needs of young people and opportunities and risks in their immediate environment, the aims, form, and frequency of the collaboration between youth work and its partners may change [27]. Such a collaboration is expected to be driven by a true partnership, by agreed and shared visions and goals [34], and by their contribution to adolescents' positive development [35]. As role competition and role confusion may act as barriers to a good collaboration [36], it is suggested that all parties involved be well-informed about each other's expectations and the boundaries that define their roles [37].

In the online lifeworld of adolescents, the role of youth work and its partners has not yet been widely reported. There are various practices of online youth work, but their theoretical underpinnings are still lacking. It is unclear how youth work can fulfil its aims online, what position it can take in the online context, and how it relates to other pedagogical actors in the online lifeworld. In this paper, our objective is to analyse the role of youth work in the online lifeworld from the perspectives of adolescents and youth work's partners.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

A qualitative research design was used to explore the perspectives of adolescents and youth work's partners regarding the role of youth work in the online lifeworld. The insights were collected through firsthand experience from the adolescents as a target group of youth work practice and from the partners that collaborate with youth work, and were meant for setting the course towards the conceptualisation of the online youth work role. The research was conducted in the Netherlands in the period of May to October 2020 in close collaboration with 14 youth work organisations. The data were collected using group conversations with young people ( $N = 175$ ) and semi-structured interviews with partners ( $N = 140$ ). The interviews and group conversations were conducted by youth workers who acted as research assistants ( $N = 27$ ). The selection of the research assistants was carried out by the managers of the participating youth work providers. Criteria for participating in the research were current employment as a professional youth worker and at least one year of experience working in the online lifeworld of young people. All the research assistants were trained by the first author in the use of research protocols for the data collection.

### 2.1. Group Conversations with Adolescents

The group conversations with young people ( $N = 175$ ) were a part of our previous study [2]. In that study, we analysed the developmental needs of adolescents in their online lifeworld. For that purpose, a photovoice method was employed with two primary objectives: (1) facilitating young people to document and reflect their strengths and concerns; (2) fostering critical dialogue and knowledge through group discussions based on visual data [38]. Adolescents were instructed to capture screenshots during moments of online activity when they encountered specific needs, questions, aspirations, concerns, or challenges, or when they sought assistance in addressing these issues [2]. After gathering the screenshots, the respondents engaged in group conversations with youth workers to deepen the understanding of how young people cope with their developmental needs in an online context. In addition, youth workers were instructed to talk with adolescents about the potential support adolescents need from youth workers when tackling their developmental needs in the online lifeworld. The data generated from these group discussions was then used in this paper to juxtapose it to the views of youth work's partners, as described in the Results section.

The respondents consisted of young individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are notoriously challenging to access. Consequently, the decision was made to employ professional youth workers as research assistants to facilitate outreach to this marginalised group and gather data from them. It was ensured that these youth workers enabled the young participants to determine which (anonymised) data they were comfortable sharing with both the youth workers and the researchers for subsequent analysis and publication. Through this approach, we succeeded in engaging young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the study while safeguarding their privacy. Youth workers selected adolescent respondents from smaller and larger places in the Netherlands and from organisations working at different levels in the online lifeworld (e.g., some experience, experienced, and advanced experience in working in the online lifeworld). The group conversations were held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Each conversation took place with no more than six and no fewer than two respondents. During the group conversations, youth workers, together with adolescents, registered the insights about adolescents' need for youth work support. These insights were anonymously registered in short descriptions and keywords, and sent to the first author for analysis.

### 2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews with Partners

Six types of partners were included in the research: parents, schoolteachers and mentors, young people's informal networks (e.g., neighbours and sport coaches), neighbourhood support teams (e.g., social workers, youth care, and debt counsellors), police, and municipal officials (see Table 1). The selection of the partners was carried out by the participating youth workers, as they have a vast network of diverse partners from various sectors. This approach enabled us to engage a significant number of respondents in the study, a task that would have otherwise presented challenges for the authors to be accomplished independently. Consequently, this decision resulted in rich data with valuable insights into the topic researched. As researchers, we were also aware that this approach could potentially introduce a degree of bias into the data, given that youth workers conducted interviews with individuals with whom they already had established professional relationships.

Youth workers approached partners from their own networks and informed them (verbally and in writing) about the aims and purpose of the research, privacy and confidentiality, and what was to be expected from them in the research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews with partners were conducted by youth workers via telephone, video call, or email and then transcribed for further analysis. Each respondent was asked five open questions regarding his/her/their role and the current and potential role of youth work in the online lifeworld.

**Table 1.** Number of partners per category.

Parents	27
Schools	27
Informal networks	30
Neighbourhood support teams	19
Police	19
Municipal officials	18
Total	140

As Table 1 shows, from each partner category, at least 18 respondents were included in the study, which constituted a large and heterogeneous group to delve into the traits that answer the research question.

### 2.3. Analysis

The descriptions from the group conversations with young people and transcripts of the interviews with partners were both analysed using a thematic analysis [39,40]. The thematic analysis allows for the identification of themes and patterns in the data [40,41]. Four main steps were employed in analysing the data: coding, theme development, theme reviews, and theme description [39]. The initial coding system was made based on the literature about the role of youth work in an offline setting (i.e., theoretical thematic analysis) and supplemented with codes from the data (i.e., inductive thematic analysis). In the second step, by using the coding system and categorising and de-categorising the formulated codes, we distinguished six themes: support needed by adolescents, online versus offline youth work practice, online relationship with adolescents, target groups, bridging role, and preventive role. In the third step, the developed themes were reviewed in relation to the coded data and the research question [42]. In this step, the themes were formed with their definite substantive structures. In the final step, the defined and reviewed themes were described with a focus on how the themes answered the research question. In this process the sub-themes were distinguished and described. For the purpose of analysis, the software program MAXQDA was used, which made the analysis systematic.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Support Needed in the Online Lifeworld as Expressed by Adolescents

From the group conversations with adolescents conducted by the youth workers as research assistants, we tentatively distinguished four types of support young people could use from youth work professionals to meet their needs in the online lifeworld:

#### (a) Instrumental support

Adolescents indicated the need for instrumental support when dealing with various practical issues online. For example, youth workers with online presence and quick and easy online access who could help with online job searches or applications, online applications for social housing, tax payments, health insurance, and support with administrative issues with government institutions.

*Young people indicated that the online step to discuss practical but urgent issues with youth workers is smaller than through the regular route: in-person offline contact. (Insights from the group conversation with adolescents.)*

Furthermore, the respondents voiced the need for instrumental support in situations where they are being harassed by strangers online, or when they are victims of exposing, grooming, or other illegal and criminal activities. They needed someone to help them block the harmful accounts, delete reshared and exposed photos, and report the harmful activities to the police. Lastly, it was also pointed out that some of the adolescents could

use support in meeting peers. Some of them indicate that they would just need to be added to a WhatsApp group chat to make further contacts and friendships.

(b) Informational support

The respondents expressed a need for informational support regarding health and well-being issues, safety, privacy, and self-presentation. For example, they needed informational support from youth workers regarding how and which aspects of their identity to present online, or which photographs are appropriate to share with a wider audience. In addition, they expressed the need for themed online meetings, discussions, and consultations on issues such as online discrimination, racism, religion, education, sexting, and drug use.

*It is indicated that it would be nice to receive more information from youth workers about the danger of drug use and dealing drugs online. (Insights from the group conversation with adolescents.)*

(c) Socioemotional support

The research assistants observed that young people need socioemotional support when coping with personal problems or when going through negative experiences in the online and offline lifeworld. They expressed the need for someone to talk to and understand their problems related to home and school, relationships, sexual identity, negative self-image, loneliness, cyberbullying, and other personal worries.

*Young people pointed out the need for support from youth workers in dealing with same-sex feelings and with negative reactions from peers to it. (Insights from the group conversation with adolescents.)*

(d) Cognitive support

The need for cognitive support was indicated for situations involving the learning of new skills and attitudes. The respondents named the following situations: discovering and developing new talents and skills through various online activities, workshops and webinars, learning online entrepreneurship, and learning how to deal with online information.

*Young people who come to youth work for talent development expressed the need for activities or workshops where they can learn how to promote themselves online as artists or budding entrepreneurs. (Insights from the group conversation with adolescents.)*

### 3.2. The Partners' Point of View

In this section, we describe the partners' points of view on the four types of support young people could use from youth workers when meeting their needs in the online lifeworld. The interviewed partners indicate that youth workers have a potential role in addressing developmental needs and creating new developmental opportunities for adolescents. They point out that just as in the offline context, adolescents need support in the online lifeworld with identity development, talent development, sexual exploration, learning new skills, meeting peers, gaining self-confidence and acceptance, improving self-presentation, etc. The data indicate that supporting adolescents with these developmental needs, and creating new developmental opportunities in the online lifeworld, could be facilitated by employing the general youth work methods in an online context. For example, informational support can be offered through online information and advice services:

*"Youth work could organise an activity together with young people and livestream it, and then talk about various topics that young people are concerned with, such as body shaming, racism, violence, etc. It should not feel like school, but to be organised in a more creative way. Invite experts, but also young people who already have experience with these issues. I think it speaks more to the young people if there is another young person who can share their experience." (Parent)*

Further, the informational support can be combined with instrumental support where adolescents can be supported with practical issues such as applying online for a job or



internship. Additionally, some of the partners pointed out that through social group work, youth workers could provide cognitive support—for example, creating learning opportunities for adolescents through online activities, webinars, and online workshops.

*“Youth work should particularly focus itself on advising young people about their online lifeworld. What problems are you facing online? Online phishing, exposing. But also offering online tools—for example, how to apply for a job, how to present yourself in an interview for a job or internship, etc. Also, an online possibility for face-to-face coaching, organising basic webinars, organising group discussions and workshops on gender diversity, cultural diversity, (sexual) harassment, and extortion on the Internet.”* (Community team)

Moreover, the interviewed partners expressed their view on how youth workers should provide online socio-emotional support to young people who deal with personal issues, such as loneliness, having problems meeting peers, and making friendships.

*“It is important to focus on individual issues such as loneliness. These young people need to be supported to build up their network. For this purpose, (online) groups can also be set up. Online, for example, through WhatsApp, video calls, forums, and other apps.”* (Community team)

### 3.3. Relation between the Online and Offline Youth Work Practice

From the data, we derived ideas about how youth work in the online lifeworld relates to the general offline youth work practice (i.e., integral part of general youth work practice) and which aspects of its role stay the same in both contexts (i.e., meaningful relationships with adolescents).

#### 3.3.1. Integral Part of General Youth Work Practice

Besides using the general youth work methods in the online lifeworld, the partners see youth work in the online lifeworld as an integral part of the general youth work practice. In their view, it should be integrated with working in the offline lifeworld with a notion that the online and offline lifeworld reinforce and complement each other.

*“Linking the offline with the online work, so they become stronger.”* (School)

*“Youth workers have their own role [in the online lifeworld] similar to the role youth workers have in public spaces.”* (Municipal officer)

*“I think that youth work should actually seek connection with young people in the online lifeworld. That’s where the potential target groups are. It is complementary to detached youth work.”* (Municipal officer)

*“So a complementary, kind of similar offer as young people get offline from youth work. I don’t think the offer has to be so different.”* (Community team)

#### 3.3.2. Meaningful Relationship with Adolescents in the Online Lifeworld

So far, this paper has discussed the possibilities of how youth work in the online lifeworld follows the offline youth work practice when it comes to its main goal: strengthening the personal development and social participation of young people. In addition, the respondents observed that, similar to the offline context, youth workers appear to have more online access to the online spaces and places of adolescents than some of the partners:

*“As a youth worker, you have a special role. As a parent, you are not included in the online lifeworld of your child. As a youth worker, you are aware of this, you are in the group apps [with young people]. Youth workers therefore know much better what is happening and can respond much better and address young people on what they see online.”* (School)

The partners indicated that the main reason for this is due to parents, teachers, police, and other partners being in a hierarchical relationship with adolescents, setting the bound-

aries and restrictions, whereas the youth workers can approach young people on a more equal level, enabling them to think and reflect on their own needs, problems, and behaviour.

*“Trust between a young person and a youth worker is somewhat greater than between a parent and a young person. Youth workers engage more in a conversation, while parents say ‘that’s not allowed’, lecturing their children or getting angry. Young people don’t want that, so, they don’t tell their parents anything. Therefore, use the role you have and the bond of trust as a youth worker.” (Parent)*

*“Youth workers are often seen as buddies, so young people are more likely to allow youth workers to see their behaviour online.” (Municipal officer)*

According to the partners, youth workers continue to be in contact with adolescents online, build meaningful relationships with them and use this close contact to engage in their online lives. In comparison to the offline youth work practice, these actions in an online context may give youth workers a specific position to gain a better view of adolescents’ online lifeworld as an important part of their lives.

### 3.4. Specifics of Youth Work in the Online Lifeworld of Adolescents

This section describes three specific aspects of youth work’s role in the online lifeworld according to youth work’s partners: reaching new target groups, potential for fulfilling a bridging role between the adolescents and partners, and taking a preventive role.

#### 3.4.1. Reaching New Target Groups

The online lifeworld gives various opportunities for youth work to easily connect with young people and to reach new target groups. In order to address the developmental needs of young people in their online lifeworld, partners stress that it is crucial for youth workers to also reach out and make contact with young people who are invisible in the offline setting.

*“[. . .]there is an opportunity online to connect with young people you don’t always see offline.” (School)*

*“It is also likely to reach online a broader target group, for example, young people who do not hang out in the streets, young people who spend more time alone at home and not with friends.” (Informal network)*

*“If you want to get in touch with young people, you can’t avoid investing digitally and, in that way, keep the connection with young people. Otherwise, you end up losing them. For a youth worker, I think it is very important to have that connection. You have to have a starting point with the youth and this is a place where they come a lot. The idea that you only meet young people on the street is outdated.” (Municipal official)*

#### 3.4.2. Bridging Role

By connecting with young people in the online lifeworld and establishing a meaningful relationship with them, youth workers also gain access to digital spaces and places that are out of reach for most other partners. This provides youth workers with valuable information about adolescents’ interests, trends, ambitions, and problems.

*“Nobody knows the lifeworld of young people as well as the youth workers. Not much is known [about the online lifeworld of young people] to the school or at home to parents, but youth workers come behind the symbolic closed door of young people’s online lifeworld. They can see what young people are doing, how they react, where they are, what kind of behaviour they show, and you can work preventively from there.” (Municipal official)*

Because of this position, youth workers are seen as an important link in connecting young people with partners to enhance support for young people.

*“Youth workers play an important role by entering the online lifeworld of young people; they are more central to it than any other professional could ever be. This gives youth*



*workers a strong information position that the city also needs in the field of prevention for example, but also a connecting position between the municipality, police, school, and all other organisations that work with young people.” (Municipal official)*

Within this bridging role, the respondents also pointed out the importance of strengthening the collaboration between youth work and its partners and complementing each other for a better support of young people. Because of its position, connection, and engagement in the online lifeworld, some of the partners see youth work as complementing and stepping into cases where, for example, school or police need more detailed and accurate insights in young people’s needs and problems.

*“Youth workers do particularly well to supplement teachers who do not always have a good idea of what is going on in the lifeworld of young people outside of school. This allows youth workers to supplement education by working together preventively on the development of young people.” (School)*

*“We from the police see that we have less contact [in the online lifeworld] with young people than the youth workers have. That is why we receive far fewer signals about cyberbullying, sexting, etc. We do see an increase in the number of young people who report these issues. In order to be able to prevent this, it is good to have this information at an early stage, because then we can react to it. That is why the collaboration between youth work and the police is so important.” (Police)*

### 3.4.3. Preventive Role

Lastly, the position youth workers have in the online lifeworld gives them the possibility of picking up online information about adolescents’ interests, appearances, and statements, assessing and analysing this information, and, if needed, responding to it. As already stated, youth workers appear to have better access to young people’s online lifeworld and can therefore play an important role in preventing and de-escalating problems, such as cyberbullying, money muling, exposing, and loneliness.

*“I believe that youth workers should be able to monitor young people online. By this I mean that they should be able to spot, for example, cyberbullying and announcements of possible fights.” (Parent)*

*“By finding themselves into the online lifeworld of young people, youth workers can closely monitor what is going on and what risks are lurking. Young people who are recruited as money mules or being exposed online. All kinds of risk factors that youth workers can respond to.” (Municipal official)*

*“In addition, it is a medium where you can focus on loneliness, for example, to identify this. Schools may be able to talk about it during a class, but online it’s a little harder for them to put a finger on it.” (Police)*

*“Youth workers can actually monitor young people online, see what young people do online, and respond to the needs that young people may encounter online.” (Municipal official)*

This last quote above points out one important issue, namely the online monitoring of adolescents in relation to their needs. Youth work’s approach towards young people is always developmental, aimed at personal development and social participation. With this in mind, this quote reflects the importance of collaborative work and prevention that benefits adolescents’ development.

These findings provide novel insights regarding the support adolescents require from youth work in the online lifeworld (i.e., instrumental, informational, socioemotional, and cognitive support), the perspectives youth work’s partners hold regarding the support young people need, and the current and potential youth work’s role coming from its position in the online lifeworld. We elaborate on this further in the next section.

#### 4. Discussion

The lead question for this paper reads: What role in the online lifeworld is expected from youth work by adolescents and youth work's partners? The responses of the adolescents, who are the beneficiaries of youth work, mentioned four different types of support they need from online youth work: instrumental, informational, socioemotional, and cognitive support. The partners (i.e., parents, schoolteachers and mentors, young people's informal networks, neighbourhood support teams, police, and municipal officials) confirmed these four types of support and gave their ideas on how the different types of support could be implemented in the online lifeworld. From the partners' perspective, it appears that online youth work has a vantage position compared to them and to the offline youth work practice. This research shows that the vantage position is especially evident in the online relationship between youth workers and adolescents, as well as the access youth workers have to online information relevant for the support and development of adolescents and the early identification of their needs and problems. It was pointed out that this vantage position may potentially encourage the collaboration between young people and partners, and between the online and offline youth work practice. When collaborating with partners, the vantage position can be utilised for prudent prevention and to benefit the development of adolescents.

The online lifeworld gives young people many possibilities to ask for instrumental and informational support, and for youth workers to provide it. Because of the online opportunities and the vantage position of youth workers, they can be easily accessed by young people through low-threshold and real-time access via social media, chat services, video calls, and online meetings and consultations. Such online support can be significant for target groups that are difficult to reach in an offline setting [23] or for young people who want to stay anonymous. However, because of this easy and fast online access to youth work services, young people can have the expectation that these services should be accessible to them around the clock and prepared to assist them promptly. Due to the impracticality of consistently meeting this expectation, youth workers can be set for a challenge in dealing with this specific issue in the online context. Further, online instrumental and informational support is important for creating awareness among adolescents about opportunities, possible risks, harmful behaviours, and their consequences in the online lifeworld. An earlier study [43] shows that this kind of support can also be used as a motivational strategy, where youth workers can deliver an immediate and concrete result for adolescents and therefore motivate them for further contact and development.

Young people look for socioemotional support from peers on social media [2]. They look for other like-minded persons who would share, support, and recognise the same beliefs, concerns, or problems [44]. The literature points out that support in these online communities is favourable only if trusted individuals, who would engage and listen to other's experiences and concerns, are present [45]. Youth work professionals often have close and meaningful relationships with young people [16]. This relationship can be experienced by adolescents as a trusted, safe, and friendly environment, where they can feel welcome to talk openly about their ambitions, aspirations, and problems [43]. Youth workers can use this meaningful relationship and their vantage position in different digital spaces to provide socioemotional support by showing interest in adolescents' issues, showing empathy and understanding, lending a sympathetic ear, and positively encouraging their confidence. Similar to this, the cognitive online support, in contrast to the offline context, can create different learning experiences that respond better to adolescents' needs in relation to their online lives.

The main purpose of general youth work practice in the Netherlands is to strengthen the personal development and social participation of young people [14]. The findings of our study show that this primary role of youth work practice, in the view of the interviewed partners, should not differ in the online lifeworld of adolescents. These respondents see youth work in the online lifeworld taking a role in supporting the personal development

and social participation of adolescents by addressing the developmental needs of young people and by creating new developmental opportunities in the online lifeworld.

Furthermore, the findings align with previous studies [21,24], suggesting that youth work in the online lifeworld should not be seen as a method, but rather as another dimension of general youth work practice—a dimension that forms an integral part of the general youth work practice, where youth workers can continue their mission in guiding and supporting young people towards adulthood. The adolescents and partners expect youth work to support young people by employing the youth work methods in the online lifeworld. By doing so, youth work would take a role in engaging and connecting with young people in the online lifeworld, and helping them with the following: meeting other peers, relaxing and having fun, promoting healthy lifestyles and well-being, receiving practical help and guidance, finding exploration spaces for different interests and aspirations, receiving information and advice, and learning new things [2]. However, this can be another challenge, as not much evidence-based knowledge is available about how the general youth work methods can be employed in the online lifeworld. It is to be expected that these youth work methods will take on different forms and appearances in the online context. Therefore, new competences and skills could be needed in order to implement these methods. On the other hand, digital tools, platforms, and online affordances can give greater possibilities for facilitating the use of these general youth work methods. For example, WhatsApp offers a low-threshold possibility to combine the methods of social group work, peer-to-peer, and information and advice.

The findings indicate that youth work has a vantage position in the online lifeworld when it comes to important information about trends, developmental needs, transgressive behaviour of young people, and their interactions with peers and adults in the online lifeworld. The partners often lack this information and therefore need a more attuned collaboration with youth work for the benefit of the young people's development. It is suggested that youth work, in this domain-transcending online environment, should step in and complement its partners. Our findings give us more knowledge on how youth work with its vantage position in the online lifeworld can adjust itself in a hybrid context, respond flexibly to the interactions between young people and different domains, and collaborate with different partners. For example, collaborating with schools in finding and contacting an absent pupil on social media, signalling the early stages of cyberbullying or online extortion, and collaborating with police and social services in preventing these issues. However, it can be said that this vantage position in the online lifeworld can also be challenging as it may give rise to unrealistic expectations among youth work's partners. The question then is where the boundaries lie and at what point youth work practice transitions into a form of surveillance, law enforcement, or an extended hand of parents monitoring their children online. Considering this, the vantage position can be viewed as a contributing factor in prudent prevention. In other words, this position should benefit the support of adolescents, the early signalling of problems with respect to their privacy, the relationships built with youth workers, and the shared and agreed visions and goals between youth work and its partners [35,46].

The heightened volume of online information accessible to youth workers with a vantage position can become the primary interest of partners, potentially leading to increased pressure on youth workers to share their information about young people's online lives and experiences. Hence, the collaboration between youth work and its partners should be conducted within the framework of safeguarding privacy and ethical codes, and in a manner that does not intrude on adolescents' online spaces for purposes that do not align with their positive development [35,46]. In this way, the vantage position in collaboration with partners may potentially give more space for youth work in the online lifeworld in order to fulfil its bridging role between young people, its partners and the offline practice. It is a bridging role that can connect young people with different partners, connect different partners together, and reinforce the offline youth work practice for a better support of adolescents.

## 5. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

In this qualitative study, a relatively large number of respondents was included: adolescents  $N = 175$  and partners  $N = 140$ . We see this as a significant strength for the study, as the number and varieties of respondents let us increase the generalisation of the findings. Additionally, youth workers were engaged in this study as research assistants. This approach not only granted us access to a challenging-to-reach target group of socially deprived young people but also provided these professionals with an opportunity to actively participate in the conceptualisation of their work. That being said, there was somewhat of a quality inconsistency in the collected data. All the interviews with partners and group conversations with young people were conducted by youth workers, and not by the authors of this study. Before the start of data collection, all the participating youth workers were trained by the first author in conducting the interviews with partners, in leading the group conversations with adolescents, and in working with a data collection protocol. The authors of the study were not present in the field during the process of data collection and had no possibility to ask additional questions or clarifications if the answers from the respondents were general, not clear or concrete enough. In addition, all interviews with partners and the majority of the group conversations with young people were conducted online via video call, chat and email services. Therefore, in a part of the data, the respondents' answers were brief and not thoroughly elaborated and clarified.

Another limitation of this study is that the selection of the respondents might have been biased. Both the adolescents and partners were selected by the youth workers only. There is a possibility that youth workers selected the respondents with whom they have good personal contact, and who mostly have good and positive experiences in working together. This might have led the respondents' answers to be less specific, favourable, and non-critical towards youth work and its role in the online lifeworld. Still, for an exploratory study, these kinds of respondents were of a great value. They gave us new insights in how youth work in the online lifeworld of young people collaborates with various partners, which can be further explored in the follow-up research.

## 6. Conclusions

While the role of youth work in the offline context is widely acknowledged, its role in the online lifeworld of young people does not yet have a strong theoretical base. In this paper, to contribute to the understanding of what the possible role of youth work in the online lifeworld could be, we explored the perspectives of young people and youth work's partners. Their insights indicate that youth work in the online lifeworld of young people is part of a general youth work practice, with a primary role of addressing the developmental needs of young people and creating new developmental opportunities in the online lifeworld. This role is expected to be fulfilled by engaging and connecting with young people in their online lifeworld, and providing them instrumental, informational, socioemotional, and cognitive support. Youth workers are expected to employ general youth work methods in an online context and collaborate more closely with partners. It is indicated that youth work in the online lifeworld has a vantage position in relation to adolescents. With this vantage position, youth work can then take a bridging and prudent preventive role in a hybrid and domain-transcending online context. By doing so, youth work in the online lifeworld can take part in reinforcing and complementing the offline practice, and fostering collaboration with and between the partners from different domains. Further research into the youth work in the online lifeworld should focus on how its role is fulfilled in an online context and whether and what new competences and skills are therefore required.

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