Youth interaction with online strangers: experiences and reactions to unknown people on the Internet

# Details

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## Topics

* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Content-related issues
* Risks and harms
* Online safety and policy regulation

## Sample

9–16-year-old Internet users from nine European countries (N = 368, 50% girls). The data were collected in individual interviews and in focus groups that did not overlap. Focus groups were conducted separately for three age categories (9–10, 11–13, and 14–16-yearsold),
and each gender. On average, six focus groups (two per each age group, one with girls, and one with boys) and 12 interviews were conducted per country (56 focus groups and 114 interviews in total).

## Implications For Parents About

Parental digital literacy

## Implications For Educators About

Professional development

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Other

## Other PolicyMaker Implication

Prevention and intervention programs

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Researchers

# Abstract

Previous research on youths’ experiences with online strangers has mostly utilized quantitative designs which may result in the omission of important parts of the youths’ experiences and perceptions. In this qualitative study, we adopt a child-centred approach and focus on the children’s and adolescents’ experiences with unknown people from the Internet. This is one of the most pronounced parental concerns, despite the fact that an online presence is now normative for most children. We use the data from focus-groups and individual interviews in nine European countries (N = 368) conducted with youths between the ages of 9 and 16 years. Participants were asked about their perceptions of potentially negative or problematic situations while using the Internet and digital technology. Using thematic analysis, we classified youths’ experiences and reactions related to interacting with online strangers in four themes: (1) non-verbal interaction; (2) initiation of contact; (3) communication; and (4) face-to-face meeting. In all four levels of interactions, children and adolescents reported a variety of positive and negative experiences and reactions. We interpret our findings with a coconstruction model which perceives children and adolescents as active participants in the online world. We conclude that children are successfully making active decisions to initiate, continue, and stop interactions with unknown people from the Internet. These findings broaden the current perspectives of youths’ meetings with unknown people online.

# Outcome

"We revealed four levels of interaction: (1) non-verbal interaction; (2) initiation of contact;
(3) communication; and (4) face-to-face meeting. In all four levels of interaction, children
and adolescents reported positive and negative experiences. Most children and
adolescents reported that they knew how to behave when they encountered an unknown
person online. After negative experiences in all levels of interaction, youths usually
reported interrupting communication with the people who caused the negative outcome.
In some cases, it was also youth in our sample who could be perceived as the perpetrator
by other Internet users." (Cernikova, Dedkova, Smahel, 2018, p. 105)

"When facing negative outcomes, youths reported seeking social support by talking to
friends or family, and utilizing technological coping (e.g., blocking/reporting the person,
deleting the messages). Overall, it was apparent that many children and adolescents know
what negative outcomes they may encounter and they were able to prevent or cope with
them quite easily." (Cernikova, Dedkova, Smahel, 2018, p.106)

"Concerning negative experiences, youths reported situations where an unknown person
stole their account, contacted them, sent inappropriate content, and communicated with
them inappropriately. In face-to-face meetings, youths reported negative experiences
caused by unmatched sympathies with the person or by boredom." (Cernikova, Dedkova, Smahel, 2018, p. 106)