"One's Social Skills Go to the Dogs": The Potential of Social Media to Elicit Information on Socially Withdrawn Youths in Finland

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Abstract: Youths who are socially isolated are largely inaccessible to social work professionals; nevertheless, most are active on social media. Feeling they have been let down by society, many such youths seek comfort in imageboards, where the idea of being anti-social is cherished and where even extremism and hate speech is tolerated. This study relies on a thematic analysis of 323 imageboard messages to identify the challenges socially withdrawn youths perceive as excluding them from society. We use the capability approach as our viewpoint, emphasizing the youths' actual capabilities to join in, as opposed to the opportunities seemingly provided by society. Our results resonate with the earlier research: Many members of the group labeled 'withdrawn youth' suffer from neuropsychological and mental health problems, fear social situations, experience a sense of shame and failure, and harbor bitterness toward society. They consider issues including unsuitable services, the onerous demands imposed by working life, and the hard values prevalent in society to restrict their opportunities to participate in that society and undermine their self-respect. Fear and negative experiences prevent socially withdrawn people from approaching social workers. Accordingly, we recommend social services keep an open mind on using digital options to reach people beyond the conventional service system.

Keywords: Social withdrawal, social media, social work, youth, Finland

The advances in digitalization present more opportunities than ever before for people to be connected. Paradoxically, feelings of loneliness and isolation have grown in recent decades, and social isolation has been recognized as an important global threat that affects all age groups (Lubben et al., 2015). In the capability approach, exclusion and the inability to relate to others have been recognized as impoverishment as well as a source of further loss (Sen, 2000). The situation also challenges the care professions, especially social workers, who are centrally positioned to help counter loneliness by developing and piloting interventions (Bessaha et al., 2020).

In Finland, social media forms a remarkable part of young people's lives: in 2020, 84% of 16-24 years old used social media every day (Statistics Finland, 2020). Young men recorded almost 20% more screen time than young women (Gracia et al., 2022). Despite embracing technological opportunities when forming and maintaining social contacts, young adults report regularly feeling lonely and socially isolated (Smith et al., 2021). One of the reasons for loneliness is not being in education or employment (Husu & Välimäki, 2017). The number of such youths has remained high for decades in the developed world. The situation has led to a growing phenomenon in developed societies called social withdrawal, typified by the group feeling confined to their homes and avoiding social

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contact (Rubin et al., 2009). Consequently, social workers and other caring professionals face challenges in reaching this section of youths (Ayoub et al., 2021). It seems that the existing services do not meet the group's needs and that there is a lack of understanding of which methods might work more efficiently (e.g., Ayoub et al., 2021; Li et al., 2017).

Social withdrawal is a well-theorized and researched phenomenon (e.g., Bowker et al., 2016). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research focusing on practices (Li & Wong, 2015a) and technologies (Lember et al., 2019) that could encourage young people who are socially withdrawn to engage with public services. The idea of service users working alongside professionals to design, create, and deliver services (Voorberg et al., 2015) does not fit those who are not interested in attending, distrust the system, or are unreachable through traditional means. The shortcomings of the social care system lead to a constant bias against and exclusion of vulnerable groups (Brandsen, 2021). With more information about socially withdrawn youth, social workers and other service providers could start developing new kinds of support services that reflect the needs of different customer groups (e.g., Bullock & Colvin, 2015; Li et al., 2017).

Online communication is a primary means of social interaction among youths in the developed world, and the vast majority use social media platforms regularly (e.g., Smith et al., 2021). Digital options are thus suitable means to reach young generations. However, the potential of digital technologies to aid service provision is hindered by a lack of empirical evidence on how vulnerable groups can be reached through digital means (Bonevski et al., 2014; Jalonen et al., 2021). This paper fills these gaps by providing findings from a case study on how social media discussion forums can be used to ensure the voices of socially withdrawn youths are heard.

The primary aim of this article is to address how youths who are socially withdrawn perceive their situation and to suggest what forms of support would help them in response to the lack of understanding of their worldview (Ayoub et al., 2021; Bonevski et al., 2014). The study specifically concentrates on the service-system level and the societal obstacles young people believe prevent them from participating in society. The article's second aim is to explore how digital technologies could assist in bridging the gap between socially withdrawn youths and social workers and other caring professionals. We used Finnish discussion board posts as our data source to illuminate the potential of social media as a source of otherwise unattainable information. The capability approach (Sen, 1985) is used as a framework to understand how the capabilities of socially withdrawn youths enable them to access Finnish society's opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

Social Withdrawal and Hikikomori Syndrome

Social withdrawal is an umbrella term that refers to individuals isolating themselves from familiar and/or unfamiliar others voluntarily and permanently (Rubin et al., 2009). The process often starts in childhood (Li & Wong, 2015b), but it seems that many young people do not even recognize withdrawing initially, and once they have, their condition may already be quite severe (Li et al., 2017). Social withdrawal has been linked to mental

health problems (Lubben et al., 2015), internet and gaming addictions (Dong et al., 2022), suicide (Haasio & Salminen-Tuomaala, 2020), and school shootings (Bogerts, 2021).

The phenomenon emerges from both psychological and societal factors. Bowker et al. (2016) listed several correlating factors, such as parental relationships, disposition, peer rejection, poor self-image, a tendency to internalize problems, and being male. Husu and Välimäki (2017), in turn, identified the following three factors as contributors to social withdrawal: excessively high expectations on the part of society and the impossibility of non-educated youths attaining status, income, and social capital; mental health problems and lack of social skills; and life-changing events beyond the individual's control.

Li and Wong (2015b) explain social withdrawal with reference to micro-level social and psychiatric issues such as family dynamics, bullying, and negative experiences of the education system, while also stating that the phenomenon is strongly influenced by socio-technological factors, such as unemployment, reduced or suspended social mobility, a rigid educational system, and the extensive use of the Internet and online gaming. Research shows that social withdrawal is also somewhat culturally specific (Norasakkunkit et al., 2017), being particularly associated with individualistic cultures (Dieckhoff & Gash, 2015; Välimäki et al., 2019). Being out of the education and employment spheres correlates with being socially excluded (Li & Wong, 2015b) and, as a rule, those not in education, employment, or training feel lonelier than those who are. Feelings of loneliness might be attributable not only to having fewer contacts but also to a lack of money, the presence of psychological strain, stigma, and a sense of shame (Dieckhoff & Gash, 2015; Välimäki et al., 2019).

One extreme representation of social withdrawal is *Hikikomori Syndrome,* which originated in Japan but is now a worldwide phenomenon (Li & Wong, 2015a; Tan et al., 2020) alongside the growth of industrialization and individualism (Bowker et al., 2016) and the constant use of technology and social media (Li & Wong, 2015b). Based on a systematic review, Nonaka et al. (2022) concluded that the elements characterizing Hikikomori Syndrome are not working or attending school, a person not socializing outside their home, and the condition lasting over six months.

Currently, however, there is no overarching definition of Hikikomori Syndrome (Tan et al., 2020). Some researchers include among those affected, people who maintain few relationships, leave their homes infrequently, or have withdrawn for a short period (Nonaka et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2020). There is also some debate over whether *hikikomori* is merely a symptom or a primary mental disorder (Pozza et al., 2019). It has been suggested (Pozza et al., 2019) that Hikikomori Syndrome should be added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) as a psychiatric disorder. The diagnostic criteria would include the following components: a person spending most of the day, and nearly every day, at home; clearly and long-lastingly avoiding social interaction; the situation interfering with the person's life; and the syndrome being unexplainable by other mental disorders (Pozza et al., 2019).

While social withdrawal certainly causes problems at the individual and societal level, it is necessary to acknowledge that the concern over this phenomenon and its labelling has also been suggested to reflect a moral judgment on the part of the dominant socio-economic

section of society (Chan, 2017). Withdrawing has also been presented as a lifestyle choice (Norasakkunkit et al., 2017). It is important to ask if professionals and researchers are aware of and able to reflect on their own cultural conventions and values and accept fundamentally different worldviews. Moreover, a narrow understanding of this phenomenon may lead to a generalization of youths being targets of various (more or less one-way) activation practices—meaning state policies aiming to push unemployed people into employment or education backed by the threat of sanctions to their social benefits. In other words, there is a risk of narrow-mindedness dominating thinking on the issue, which does not leave room to acknowledge youths who have decided to live differently, such as in a socially withdrawn manner.

The Paradox of Social Media

Early depictions of social media promised an innocent arena for sharing information and interacting socially. However, as social media matured and became ubiquitous, its value as an empowering technology came to be questioned. The penetration of social media usage, combined with the rapid development of artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques, uncovered the ambivalence of social media. Concerns have been raised over issues such as deep social polarization, the rapid diffusion of misinformation and disinformation, privacy breaches, and data surveillance (e.g., McKay & Tenove, 2021; Zuboff, 2019). To put it in a somewhat simplified way, what was once thought to be a remedy has become the disease.

There is extensive research on how youths use social media, and the findings indicate several purposes and consequences. Numerous advantages and disadvantages can be identified. Benefits reported in studies include enhancing social contact, independence, and communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), developing a sense of connection with others (Wong, 2020), fostering of individual identity and expressing identity (Boyd, 2008), reducing loneliness (Kivijärvi et al., 2019), increasing quality of friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), gaining informational and educational benefits (Boyd, 2008), health advice and peer support (Robinson et al., 2016) actualizing citizenship through political expression (Weinstein, 2014).

On the negative side, studies have identified several concerns: social media addiction (Davila et al., 2009), online meanness and cyberbullying, misunderstandings, unwanted contact and unintentional disclosures (Christofides et al., 2012), a detrimental impact on cognitive and emotional well-being (Kross et al., 2013), increased risk of depression (Jelenchick et al., 2013), limited self-regulation and susceptibility to pressure from peers (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), fear of missing out (Oberst et al., 2017), polarizing political engagement (Keating & Melis, 2017), and inspiring and worsening psychopathologic behaviors (Vainikka, 2020).

The paradox of social media is palpable (Jalonen, 2014). Social media sites allow youths to accomplish many things online that are important to them. Sites can help maintain connections with friends and family, make new friends, create and express identities, exchange ideas, and give and receive emotional and informational support. However, social media brings new risks, such as peer-to-peer misbehavior, inappropriate and

insulting content diminishing self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, and the threat of data leakage and connected privacy breaches. Social media lends itself to acts of self-expression and identity management and engaging with others.

Social media has also acquired a prominent role in social welfare practices (Dolinsky & Helbig, 2015), an effect heightened owing to the recent pandemic (e.g., Misha et al., 2021). Social media can offer a social worker, for example, a way to reach existing and prospective clients (Bullock & Colvin, 2015) or a method to assess service needs, conduct interventions, and evaluate service quality (Chan, 2016). It can be a tool to support case assessment (Sage & Sage, 2016) and working with communities (Sitter & Curnow, 2016). Social media also offers a window into the lives of the youth and, in so doing, provides social workers with new ways to understand the experiences and perspectives of youth.

The Capability Approach to Social Withdrawal

The capability approach has become an important framework for the evaluation and assessment of well-being, social arrangements, and policies. Amartya Sen (1985) and Martha Nussbaum (1988) are among the key developers of this framework, focusing on the quality of life that individuals are able to achieve. According to Sen (1985), this should be analyzed in terms of people's capabilities to function, meaning their opportunities to undertake activities they want and to be who they wish to be. Sen calls these valuable achievements *functionings*, which include, for example, working, resting, being healthy, and being part of a community. The crucial point is the freedom and actual opportunities people have to live the life they want and be the person they aspire to be, referred to as their *capabilities* (Sen, 1985). These aspects are strongly affected by economic and social opportunities, political and civil rights, and enabling conditions such as health, education, and encouragement (Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022). Another important element is individuals' "agency" (i.e., individual abilities to pursue and realize their goals; Alkire, 2016; Sen, 1985).

The capability approach offers alternatives to traditional well-being measures such as income (Sen, 1985) and challenges the dominance of the neo-liberal ideology (Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022). Analyzing the roots of capabilities is important, as is understanding exactly how individual traits and social structures manifest in a person's situation (Naz, 2016). Sen (2000) speaks of the multidimensionality of poverty, addressing it as a deprivation of certain crucial capabilities—not merely physical ones but also more elaborate social achievements, such as participation in a community or being able to appear in public without experiencing a sense of shame.

Exclusion may take an active or a passive form, the latter arising through societal processes without actual intention. Sen (2000) claims that unemployment is the most important factor and a major cause of social exclusion in Europe. The effects of unemployment are not confined to having a low income but include several other personal and society-level losses. These include deterioration of skills, confidence, and sense of control; lack of freedom, psychological and physical harm, disruptions to social relations, passivity and lack of motivation, and at the societal level, underutilization of productive power, increasing inequality and weakened social values and social cohesion fostered by

cynicism and hostile attitudes to society (e.g., Mathers & Schofield 1998; Weckström 2012; Karsten et al. 2018).

The main principles of the capability approach align with the core of social work values, as the approach focuses on evaluating individual well-being and advancing social justice (Den Braber, 2013; Kjellberg & Jansson, 2022). Den Braber (2013) differentiates three main ways to connect the capability approach with social work strategies and programs—the theory of action for professionals, a normative framework for legitimatizing strategies and tools, and an evaluative instrument for social policies and actions. Kjellberg and Jansson's (2022) scoping review revealed that the capability approach was used in social work research in several ways: as a method for investigating the sense of well-being, as a tool for social workers to conceptualize, understand, and support their clients, and in addressing structural inequalities and evaluating social practices.

Sen (2004) opted not to specify the list of capabilities owing to the list being dependent on context. This vagueness has led to capabilities being operationalized in a variety of ways. Burchardt and Vizard (2011) defined ten domains of the most important capabilities connected with inequality: life, physical security, legal security, health, education and learning, standard of living, productive and valued activities, participation and influence, social life, identity and respect. Peruzzi (2014) distinguished capabilities based on domains of social exclusion, including physical health, mental well-being, enjoyment of relationships, participation in political life, standard of living, access to social services, and engagement in productive and valued activities. Today, several of those capabilities manifest themselves online, especially with young people through virtual learning, social media influencing, and forming and maintaining relationships. However, online options may also reduce the readiness to engage in face-to-face activity and have created situations in which some people interact with others only through digital means.

We aimed to explore how youth who are socially withdrawn 1) perceive their situation, and especially which kind of service-system level and societal obstacles they feel exclude them from society, 2) what kind of supports could benefit them, and 3) how digital technologies could assist social workers in reaching these youths. This topic is important, as the poisonous atmosphere of imageboards allure especially young men who feel mistreated and excluded (Vainikka, 2020). We do not truly understand their reality (Ayoub et al., 2021; Bonevski et al., 2014).
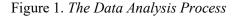
Data

The empirical data were gathered from Ylilauta.org, one of Finland's most popular imageboards, particularly among young people. Ylilauta emerged in 2011 and is a Finnish representative of an imageboard: an online forum focusing on posting images alongside text and discussion (Ylilauta n.d.a). It is not owned by media companies but by a private individual, who is also the main administrator. The forum is moderated by volunteers and, according to the Ministry of Justice, the main platform for Finnish hate speech (Kettunen & Paukkeri, 2021). Ylilauta describes itself as "a privacy-oriented anonymous discussion board where you are free to discuss almost anythin." (Ylilauta n.d.b).
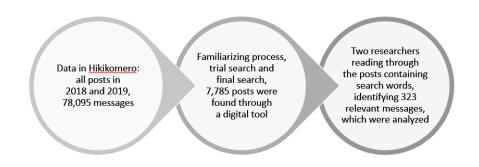
One of the discussion forums in Ylilauta is called *Hikikomero,* which consists of young adults who describe themselves as having no or few social relationships (Husu & Välimäki 2017). The forum's name is based on Hikikomori Syndrome but is also wordplay, as in the Finnish language, *hiki* means sweat, and *komero* means a closet. Users refer to their limited sphere of life and breaking out in a cold sweat if forced to go out in public. Both sympathetic advice and anti-social behavior toward others co-exist on this forum, and it creates a sub-culture and a community of its own, marked by participants distancing themselves from society and using negative characterizations of other people. Hateful comments, lack of empathy, and misogynous views abound, which is common in online imageboards, such as 4chan and 8chan (Vainikka, 2020).

Hikikomero Syndrome has been studied from various perspectives, including the differences between the information needs of Finnish and Japanese socially withdrawn people (Haasio & Naka, 2019), the participants' reasons for their withdrawal (Husu & Välimäki, 2017), and the forum's relationship with social exclusion and anti-social behavior (Vainikka, 2020). We chose this forum as our data source because of its popularity. Although the participants do not expressly represent the Hikikomori phenomenon, they spend much of their time online and mainly form their social contacts in that space. Mental health problems seem common, and the participants' everyday lives are characterized by fear of social situations and loneliness (Husu & Välimäki, 2017; Vainikka, 2020). While the forum permits anonymity, surveys reveal that its users are mostly male and aged between 20 and 30 (Haasio & Naka, 2019; Husu & Välimäki, 2017). The forum does not offer a representative sample of young Finnish people as a whole but does offer a lens on the reality of young men who are lonely and withdrawn.

Method

The empirical data consist of messages published during 2018 and 2019 on the Hikikomero discussion forum; a total of 78,095 messages. These messages were downloaded on March 2020 from a database owned by a company that each day gathers social media messages written in Finnish and published on different social media platforms. The study builds on research investigating social withdrawal and the capability approach to provide insights into the world of socially isolated youths. The data helped unveil which service-system level and societal challenges withdrawn youths feel prevent them from taking part in society and living the life they desire. We were particularly interested in working life, studying, employment services, and social services. Choices motivated by employment and education play a significant role in the lives of young people, and in Finland, those unable to access them consume employment and social services provided by the state. The provision of those services carries a threat of sanctions to the welfare benefits of those who refuse to take up proffered activities, such as training or work experience placement. To avoid the moral judgment of the dominant socio-economic class (Chan, 2017), we concentrated on messages posted by people expressing dissatisfaction with their situation and who were unable to achieve their desired outcomes.

Figure 1. *The Data Analysis Process*

We deployed thematic analysis in line with our research purposes, informed by the capability approach and prior research on social withdrawal. Our thematic analysis followed the five steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

(1) Familiarization with the data. Both authors explored the messages with a tailored digital tool. The main author carried out a trial search with the Finnish words *osallistua* (take part, participate, attend, engage in, be involved) and *este* (obstacle, barrier, hindrance, impediment). The results obtained seemed rather limited, so the main author investigated the messages on services, working life, and studying and found they contained information about the participants' capabilities and the obstacles to attendance they faced. The authors discussed this and decided to include commonly used words related to these themes to ensure data quality. The words were lemmatized in that they were sorted in a corpus to group with all their variant and inflected forms (Table 1).

(2) Generating the initial codes. The authors made independent trial codings from a sample of 100 messages of the 7785 posts identified. The differences between researchers' trial codes were discussed, and further work principles were agreed upon. The researchers gathered the posts in Excel files and sorted the messages under suitable headings. Both researchers collated the messages under initial codes, chosen according to the research question, trial codings, and previous research on capability sets and social withdrawal. Many messages could be assigned to several codes and themes. The initial codes the researchers agreed on were: seeking work; studying (only posts related to university or vocational school study were collated as the research focus was on the present); employment services; society; requirements of working life; relationships; inability to pursue ambitions; attitudes of professionals; mental health; practical hindrances and obstacles; proposals and suggestions.

Table 1. *Search Words and Examples*

Topic	Search word(s)	Messages	Text Example
Work-related	"Työ", "ammatti", "palkka", "duuni" (Work/job, profession, salary)	6865	I graduated with a professional qualification, worked in my specialist field for a while, then got sacked as "I didn't fit into the group."
Education-related	"Opiskelu", "koulutus", "yliopisto", "amk", "ammattikorkea" (Education, study, university, university of applied sciences)	443	I don't get bullied at university, but I am excluded from everything.
Employment services	"Työtoiminta", "työkokeilu", "kurssi", "harjoittelu" (Rehabilitative work activity, work experience placement, course, labor market training)	174	I was first in the rehabilitative work activity in, 2005 and then all the clients were junkies, alkies, people with mental health problems, and those who were otherwise really deeply marginalized, the long-term unemployed.
Public services	"Sosiaalitoimisto", "Kela[1]", "sossu" (Social office, "Kela[1]")	174	When I was still able to manage my affairs with the social, it was more human. With Kela[1], there is no humanity. They just try to figure out reasons to cut your support and delay the decisions.
Engagement	"Osallistua", "osallistuminen" (take part, participate, engage in, be involved)	131	In the closet[2], one's social skills go to the dogs. You then cannot join in a conversation.
Barriers	"Este", "rajoite", "haitta", "epäonnistuminen" (obstacle, barrier, hindrance, impediment, failure)	104	In theory, age isn't an obstacle, but preferring to cube [meaning the withdrawal process] is; because it means that you lose your grip on so-called real life.

Notes. [1] The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which pays income support, sickness benefits, pensions, and labor market support for those who don't belong to trade unions or have insufficient work experience to qualify for trade union unemployment benefits.
[2] In Finland, 'being in the closet' usually refers to people hiding their sexual orientation. However, the participants in this forum use it to refer to being confined to their homes.
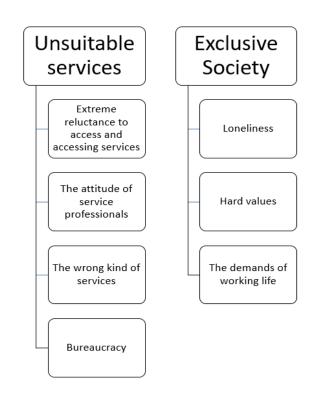
(3) Searching for themes: The main author examined all the collated messages, combining suitable codes to simplify the data, addressing the issue of some initial codes representing only a few messages, and searching for themes present in several or all of the codes. The authors discussed the findings and agreed upon seven themes among the messages, which seemed to play a part in excluding people who are socially withdrawn from social services and society. These themes were: personal fears and shame; negative service experiences; neuropsychological and mental health problems; problems with interaction and communication; bitterness and hostility toward other people and society;

the importance of paid work; and complicated-intertwined problems that had developed over a long period.

(4) Reviewing the themes: The main author read the messages once more, marking them according to how they contributed to the research question: whether they related specifically to the service system or society in general. It became clear that some refinement and combining would be necessary, as the distinctions between themes were unclear. It is worth noting that there is still some overlap.

(5) Defining and naming themes. The researchers had a final discussion about the data, the analysis process, and the themes found. Seven identified themes were condensed into two overarching themes, which relate to the unsuitability of services and the role of society in exclusion. The former encompasses the forum participants' extreme reluctance to access services, the attitude of service professionals, the wrong kind of services, and bureaucracy. The latter relates to loneliness, hard values, and the demands of working life.

Figure 2. *Service-System Level and Societal Obstacles That Youths Who Are Withdrawn Consider Prevent Them From Participating In Society*

Findings

The current study aimed to determine what service-system-level or societal obstacles socially withdrawn youths feel prevent them from participating in society. The results of our thematic analysis resonate with earlier research on social withdrawal, as well as Sen's (2000) listing of the effects of unemployment and Peruzzi's (2014) dimensions with the focus being on mental well-being, enjoyment of social relationships, access to public services (social, health, employment, and youth-oriented), and engagement in productive and valued activities. We present our key findings below with examples of the messages on the *Hikikomero* forum to exemplify the final themes. The messages were translated from Finnish to English by the authors, who aimed to be cognizant of the benefit of retaining the spirit of the forum. The meaning of the messages was also checked with an English native, who also speaks Finnish fluently. Overall, the messages were well-written, but the syntax of the posts was sometimes untypical. The use of the forum's own argot was common, which often included fabricated words and terms used in non-standard ways.

Using an online forum to harvest data raises ethical considerations (Convery & Cox, 2012), as participants have not been able to give consent to the use of their posts. However, the forum hosted on Ylilauta is anonymous and public and includes a disclaimer that the posts may be used as research material. Some of the participants might not realize that this is the case, as the boundaries between private and public tend not to be explicit in online contexts (Convery & Cox, 2012). We have respected the participants' privacy; we do not individualize any writers or provide any information that could identify them. The fact that the text extracts were translated from Finnish into English means that the data do not exist in the same format on the Internet as in this article.

We avoided bias by approaching the data openly, eliciting the obstacles from the messages. However, it must be admitted that the research team created the initial categories in advance of data gathering, and therefore, those categories reflect the team's values, such as participation in society being a worthwhile goal. The negative connotation of social withdrawal could and should be questioned as it can also be seen as a personal choice (Chan, 2017; Norasakkunkit et al., 2017). However, our data make it clear that although some expressed contentment, the majority of posts revealed dissatisfaction. Our findings emerged following a thorough familiarization process with our data that involved two researchers reading the posts three times after the selection phase.

Unsuitable Services

Participants reported factors contributing to their sometimes extreme reluctance to access services. Those factors included experiences of exclusion and rejection from workplaces, schools, and society in general, and also a lack of comprehension on the part of service providers and those service providers sometimes belittling their clients. Many of those posting had accessed different forms of social and health services (albeit in many cases only briefly) and found them unhelpful or unsuitable: "I know the low-threshold meeting places and have visited one, but the crowd there seems to be of a different age, and I do not seem to adapt to that place." Lack of money or material resources did not come

up as a major challenge, confirming Sen's (1990) idea about material resources as a means but not an end to achieving well-being. Unemployment in particular cannot be countered simply by providing social security, as it is related to so many other negative effects (Sen, 2000).

Many forum users professed their dissatisfaction with the help available from the service system or stated none was available. The feeling that professionals did not understand their problems or questioned and diminished them was common, as seen in Writer 1's post:

> *That is why one should never ask advice from normal people about one's life because the only responses are like the best lines from Donald Duck. Even qualified doctors, psychologists, and nurses offer this verse advice for real, despite knowing very well that you cannot fix neurological disabilities by going to a school, for a walk, or to a rehabilitative workplace to carve wooden dildos.*

The participants also stated that service professionals patronized them and did not appreciate their achievements and skills if they did not fit the predetermined standards; for example, if a young person had taught themselves coding but did not have recognized qualifications. Access to the services listed by Peruzzi (2014) is not enough if the contact person for that service has a negative attitude or insufficient knowledge of the customer's situation.

The forum users commonly expressed how they found applying for and dependence on benefits humiliating. Employment services, an integral part of social work with young adults in Finland, were a popular topic. Many participants felt that rehabilitative work activities were the only service offered to them, and in the service professionals' opinion, work was a cure for all illnesses as well as a remedy for exclusion. As demonstrated in Writer 2's example, these services were generally seen as exploitative and not a valued activity as such. The evident frustration was remarkably intense. Many participants referred to the employment services as slavery and voiced very strong opinions about them; however, some considered them appropriate and valuable.

> *I have even been bullied on employment office training schemes, where in practice, one works without pay in some company for several months. ...This is a good help for years of poverty and marginalization as one has to go to get bullied for eight hours five days a week for several months or risk sanctions.*

Some participants shared their experience of the problems with Finnish bureaucracy and wished the system were more flexible. Many felt managing the triad of the employment office, Kela (the Social Insurance Institution of Finland), and the social office was very stressful. The employment service and Kela professionals were considered mainly to be unsympathetic bureaucrats, whereas social workers appeared more humane. Writer 3's post relates to the change when responsibility for the payment of income support was transferred from the municipalities to the state-led Kela in 2017.

> *Here as well, when one could deal with the social services, there was humanity. In addition, they truly tried to help us to move on with our life. Sometimes they paid full support just to encourage a hobby and buy clothes etc., so we don't only get stuck*

within four walls the whole time. Kela doesn't have any kind of humanity. They are just trying to figure out reasons to cut support and delay decisions. Probably decisions are made like a conveyor belt, which adds even more errors and isolates the customer [from them].

The fear of sanctions applied to their unemployment benefit and income support was a pronounced topic. And even though the disability pension was seen as a lucrative target, it was also claimed that young claimants are forgotten by society, and then loneliness becomes even more difficult to handle, as demonstrated in Writer 4's post:

I have ruined everything in my life and grandly. Nobody offers help anymore: not healthcare, not the social office, or any other place. (...) They kicked me out of public health care as I got a disability pension a couple of years ago. I have nothing, absolutely nothing anymore. Fear and regret stayed as a friend. Go to school, go to work. Go to those uncomfortable situations. Catch those opportunities. I didn't, I didn't dare, and in the end, nothing was left.

The Exclusive Society

This theme consisted of complex, entrenched entities revolving around how other people and society contribute to the withdrawal phenomenon in Finland. The withdrawing process often begins in childhood, when some children are bullied or ostracized, which is visible in Writer 5's text:

I cannot help my autism. I would have wanted to be normal, but this is the result of exclusion as they push one into the closet. I have my own shit in the background already (traumas and becoming the target of bullying), and then, as an adult, I still have to try to adapt to society somehow. I don't anymore. I'll tell this whole bustle where to get off and live as a rat [meaning living on benefits] for the rest of my life then.

The loneliness in the posts was palpable, even though some claimed to no longer need the company of other people and felt being sociable was burdensome. The sociability aspect raises the question of whether social relationships are a valuable goal for the participants—a prerequisite of "functionings" under the capability approach (Alkire, 2016)—and whether withdrawal is more like a lifestyle choice (Norasakkunkit et al., 2017). This finding might partially reflect young people's social connectedness in the digital age (Wong, 2020). However, in light of the forum participants' bitterness, it also appears to be a response to a lifetime of exclusion and bullying, which were commonly claimed. In addition to active bullying, passive forms included being left out, staring, laughing, whispering, and teasing from classmates or co-workers, to which the participants were unable to retaliate. Many participants simply did not know how to make friends. Writer 6 elucidates the participants' attitudes to socializing, as well as their tendency to internalize their problems, as noted in earlier research (Bowker et al., 2016):

I have mainly bad experiences from university. Illusory freedom of choice makes the useless but obligatory [studies] feel even more impossible. Another thing I have noticed is so-called low-intensity bullying. I do not want to reveal my subject but

in this field, a remarkable portion of students are unauthentic popinjays. For me, it started little by little with long stares and laughter, "hey, NN is here" style comments started to be audible sometimes. Well, there are reasons due to certain mental health problems. Well, consciously I don't care about any drama shit, but a decent amount of anxiety from which is almost impossible to get rid of is left and friends…zero for sure.

Problems with mental health and neuropsychological disorders, especially Asperger's Syndrome and autism, were expressed as obstacles to participating in valued activities and seemed to make the participants feel they were undervalued by society, as also showcased in the research results of Molin et al. (2017). There were many mentions of shame, which Sen (2000) offers as a good example of social-exclusion-shaped capability deprivation. The participants feared they would fail or humiliate themselves. In many cases, this was linked to negative experiences. Many participants also seemed to lack motivation; they had possessed it once, but their life experiences had diluted it, and a feeling of being stuck in the home stymied their ability to act. Some lacked interest in anything and had no dreams or ambitions, while some appreciated the freedom and stress-free life, coping with only a little money. They made comments like "as I don't have a life anyway," and some criticized the current exaltation of materialism.

The participants found society lacking in many ways. Many felt hard values, such as competitiveness and productivity, had assumed too much importance. Employment in Finnish society was considered hugely important, almost to the point of being a prerequisite for having dignity, a perception that aligns with Sen's (2000) findings on the link between unemployment and social exclusion. The participants felt they were blamed for their situation in public discussions and in their relationship spheres.

Much discussion revolved around participation in productive activities, and work, in particular, was considered a valued activity, as the capability approach anticipates. Access to working life was considered challenging for a variety of reasons, most of them internalized, such as having the wrong demeanor, gaps in the curriculum vitae, too long spent studying, a lack of experience or education, and, in contrast, being overqualified. Moreover, competition for jobs was seen as extremely rigorous because "normal" people were also unemployed. However, many reported having work experience; albeit portraying it as mainly negative. Bullying and burnouts were common, with participants claiming they were unable to work the full hours expected in modern working life, especially if the job was unsatisfactory or if life did not offer anything positive to counter working life. Adjustments to working life were considered important.

Several forum participants expressed bitterness that merely working is no longer sufficient in current society as there was an expectation that staff would socialize together too, even if the job mainly required solitary work. The frustration and disappointment relating to employment seemed to lead to resentment and even misanthropy, thus confirming Sen's (2000) findings of enhanced cynicism, a sense of exclusion, and grievances against society among the long-term unemployed. Wong (2020) suggests that withdrawal can also be seen as a response to the precarious nature of work in the twenty-first century, reflecting the agency of young people in the face of structural barriers.

Negative experiences, bitterness, and the participants' personalities create a kind of downward spiral, where encounters with other people are interpreted negatively, at some point completely blocking the participants' attempts to normalize, as they put it. The attitude to "normal" people was usually hostile; the inability to relate to others was a deprivation in itself and something that indirectly exacerbated other forms of deprivation (Sen, 2000). The forum participants had had plenty of time to ruminate on past injustices, and the *Hikikomero* forum offers peer support for that kind of attitude and may even amplify it. The situation highlights the paradox of social media (Jalonen, 2014) as the forum discussions offer peer support and exemplify pro-social behavior while simultaneously giving prominence to hateful comments and to those displaying no empathy. The forum may thus work against the participants, deepening their feelings of exclusion (see also Vainikka, 2020), as the post by Writer 7 shows:

> *Unknown people are just the group of normal people you don't belong to and by whom you have been discriminated against. They talk about marginalized but the correct term is discriminated, but they don't use this because it would be inculpatory. Some random employee might not have discriminated against you but might have been discriminating against some other 'hikky' [a person who is socially withdrawn] or just allowed it to happen by standing back.*

Discussion and Implications

Loneliness is a worldwide phenomenon, threatening people's well-being, especially in the developed world, and is recognized among the Grand Challenges that social work champions (Lubben et al., 2015). The posts to the *Hikikomero* forum provided a unique glimpse into the lives of youths who are socially withdrawn, the obstacles they identify as preventing them from participating in society, and the outcomes they deem important. The forum participants seem to have access to numerous options geared around Finland's university education being free at the point of delivery and its guaranteed basic income for all. However, in practice, the forum participants lack the actual capabilities to lead the lives they want (see Sen 1985, 2000) and are constrained from attaining the outcomes they value by various intertwined forms of passive exclusion caused by the demands of working life, other people, and an unaccepting society. Additional hurdles include mental health and neuropsychology issues, a sense of shame, and a fear of social situations.

Social work with adults in Finland is closely connected to employability and employment services. It is therefore important to discuss which employment services cater to the needs of the members of society who are socially withdrawn. The current policy is that one size should fit all. That policy results in a situation exemplified in one of the posts where clients of the social rehabilitation service were described as including "alkies, junkies, people with mental health problems and those who were otherwise really deeply marginalized…long-term unemployed." The jobs assigned to participants were often monotonous and thus not suited to those who are, as one participant put it, "intelligent but retarded." That description would, for example, encompass highly intelligent people whose potential is constrained by their suffering from a neurological disorder such as autism or Asperger's Syndrome.

Another implication of the current system in Finland and other developed countries is that they should enable opportunities for anonymous and faceless interaction, as social anxieties and shame hinder traditional face-to-face contact. Menon and Miller-Cribbs (2002) state that online counseling may suit those unwilling to seek traditional counseling. Anonymity confers advantages such as an opportunity for intimacy and to manage feelings of being stigmatized. One option could be exploring different social media arenas where previously unreachable groups might be found, as social media seems to provide spaces where peer support (Kivijärvi et al., 2019) and professional help (Chan, 2016, 2018) are sought and received. This is true of the *Hikikomero* forum, although the probable contagion of the hostile atmosphere can also be considered a negative effect (Vainikka, 2020). The atmosphere resonates with the compatibility pressures described in the form of groupthink (Janis, 1971), meaning that members do not wish to express ideas perceived to be unpopular.

Overall, the strict division between the face-to-face and online worlds seems to no longer be relevant to the younger generations. Virtual opportunities should be regarded as complementing traditional ones, as some previously unreachable groups might be accessible with online methods (Liu et al., 2018). However, the feeling of loneliness was clearly evident on the forum, and the extensive use of social media has been linked to social withdrawal (Li & Wong, 2015b). One example based on information and communication technologies, with the potential to tackle loneliness, is the moderated online group, in which the presence of a professional ensures a positive atmosphere. The results show that a moderated group can particularly benefit lonely youths who find attending groups in person challenging (Kivijärvi et al., 2019). Some kind of professional facilitator would be needed in such groups, for example, to counter the participants' limited social skills, as exemplified in this Hikikomori forum entry, "if your social skills (in the best case) were left in high school, it is extremely difficult to start creating new relationships."

Accordingly, social workers should not shy away from the professional use of social media but embrace it, especially with youths, a group for whom it has proved to have several advantages (e.g., Stott et al., 2016). Social media should be seen not only as a way to reach people and maintain connections but also as a source of unfiltered information on people's situations and needs (Jalonen et al., 2021). This approach would counteract the lure of "tamed" and neutral experiences, often present in the service user involvement where participants can find themselves constrained by conditions determining how they should work and present their story (Meriluoto, 2017). The posts examined suggest service professionals would benefit from a greater understanding of their clients' secluded lifestyle and neuropsychiatric problems and also of the paths that led them to withdraw. Such understanding is essential for the early identification and assistance of young people who are not yet isolated but at risk of becoming so, as withdrawal is a process (Li et al., 2017).

Conclusion

This study explored the potential of social media to elicit information on how youths in Finland who are socially withdrawn perceive the social services system and why they believe society excludes them. In a way, they are seen as experts-by-experience facing

difficulties and/or care services in the past, sharing their experiences of social welfare and healthcare organizations (McLaughlin, 2009). In practice, however, it has been found that the experts-by-experience approach is used to justify an existing rationale. Consequently, collaborative individuals intent on seeking consensus are sought for such roles (Meriluoto, 2017). The practice raises an important question of whether we are willing to hear critics of the service system or society in general and ready to rethink the status quo instead of merely fine-tuning existing services.

There are a few limitations to this research. The sample was collected from one Finnish discussion board. In addition, using the Internet as a data source might risk the contributors being unrepresentative of the target group. Social withdrawal is such a complex phenomenon that it will never be completely understood by analyzing social media messages. However, *Hikikomero* and similar social media platforms can provide a unique window into the lives of youths who are socially withdrawn. Anonymity may foster honest discussion about painful and stigmatizing themes. However, group dynamics often lead to complaints being exaggerated, and the possibility of social media bots manipulating conversations and spreading fake news is a real one.

The qualitative form of research makes it possible to explore the obstacles to the target group's participation and also examine what motivates them to become involved. One possible avenue for further research would be to explore exploiting social media to empower the persons who are socially withdrawn on their own terms and to clarify what those terms would be. It is also necessary to focus on public service providers' willingness to cross the portal opened by social media. Gathering information about the situations and challenges faced by youths who are socially withdrawn will remain worthless unless it is transformed into new approaches to practice.

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