What do we know about the roles of digital literacy and online resilience in fostering young people's wellbeing?

As societies repeatedly raise concerns about the harmful outcomes of certain online experiences on young people's wellbeing, one priority for research is to identify the factors that mediate between risk and harm. If we can find these, surely we can deploy them strategically to protect young people from these harmful outcomes without curtailing their online opportunities.

One factor that has attracted a lot of interest is digital literacy. Many researchers, educators and policymakers are optimistic that digital literacy interventions can help young people build online resilience against harmful outcomes and hence safeguard their wellbeing on the internet. Indeed, some studies have shown that young people who possess the skills and knowledge necessary to safely and effectively use digital technologies to their advantage are better able to cope with online risk experiences and hence to reduce any negative outcomes linked to such risk experiences. However, while there has been considerable scholarly attention to young people's digital literacy, their online resilience, and their wellbeing in the context of online risk over the past years, this research largely resides in separate bodies of literature. In other words, we just don't know whether or how literacy, resilience and wellbeing are connected.

In our systematic evidence review we examined 30 empirical studies to synthesize the state of the art of research on young people's digital literacy, online resilience, and wellbeing in relation to online risks into one integrated framework and look into the associations among these concepts. Here are our four main findings:

1. Research suggests that negative online experiences undermine young people's wellbeing. However, this research is based on correlations, and the associations are generally of weak or medium strength. Further, some studies point to a reciprocal relationship between risk (particularly cyber-victimisation) and wellbeing; in other words, it is likely not only that being victimized undermines wellbeing but also that those with lower wellbeing (for instance those who reported higher levels of depression and anxiety) find themselves more often victimized online.
2. Exposure to risk seems to play an essential role in the development and manifestation of online resilience. Although many parents worry about risk, some risky experiences give young people the chance to develop ways of coping that can minimize or prevent experiences of harm in the future. If we regard coping as itself a form of digital literacy, this finding can help explain the common finding that digitally literate young people encounter more risks online than their less digitally literate peers.
3. As we expected, online resilience protects young people's wellbeing in the face of online risk: the research shows that having coped with a negative online experience contributes to young people's wellbeing. Being more digitally literate is also positively linked to wellbeing, doubtless because it brings beneficial outcomes for young people while also shielding them from harm when they encounter online risk.
4. The hypothesised link between digital literacy and online resilience was only examined in a few studies, and it emerged as positive but rather weak. While digital literacy does not protect young people from encountering risks online, it helps protect themselves from harmful outcomes by supporting the development of effective coping strategies.

These findings encourage policy and educational initiatives designed to promote digital literacy and online resilience as factors protecting young people's wellbeing online, as an alternative to societies' overprotective impulses. Given that young people will inevitably use digital technologies and be exposed to negative online experiences, it is vital to find ways to protect them that don't unduly limit their access or undermine the positive outcomes of internet use. Further research into the role of digital literacy in the development of young people's resilience to harm from online risks, and their implications for their wellbeing is therefore necessary to support further initiatives aimed at protecting young people's wellbeing online. As the systematic review only uncovered weak associations between digital literacy and online resilience, research should further disentangle the link between the two by looking into each of the dimensions of digital literacy and by asking which dimensions are particularly relevant for online resilience, as the composite measures may obscure any differential effects.

ySKILLS is taking important steps towards a better and multi-faceted understanding of young people's digital literacy and its value for their wellbeing by measuring digital skills and wellbeing longitudinally over three waves, supplemented with performance test measures and specific studies focusing on at-risk groups of young people.

The full findings of this systematic evidence review are now published in the Special Issue of European Psychologist on Digital Revolution. You can access the article via this link.

Notes

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