

The Missing Environment: Online Harms in Adolescent Psychosocial Assessment

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Abstract

Adolescent psychosocial assessment evaluates environmental and behavioral domains: home, education, peer relationships, activities, substance use, sexuality, emotional functioning, and personal safety. HEEADSSS and SSHADESS organize these domains systematically [1,2]. But adolescents now develop identity, form relationships, encounter conflict, and experience victimization through digital platforms. Evidence shows particular online experiences cybervictimization and technology-facilitated sexual abuse cause clinically meaningful harm [3–8]. Established assessment frameworks don't capture these digital environments or the harms that occur in them.

This study uses structured content analysis to compare HEEADSSS, SSHADESS, and contemporary guidance from major organizations against a predefined taxonomy of digital experiences relevant to clinical assessment.

Digital coverage will be coded across eight domains: (1) online relationships and peer communities; (2) cyberbullying, harassment, and interpersonal victimization; (3) sexual exploitation, coercion, and image-based abuse; (4) exposure to self-harm, suicide, eating-disorder, or behavior-reinforcing content; (5) extremist, hateful, or manipulative communities; (6) algorithmic and platform-mediated content exposure; (7) AI companions and persistent human-machine relationships; and (8) privacy, surveillance, and data collection or misuse. Each framework will be coded for explicit assessment, indirect assessability, or absence of each domain.

The distinction between digital environment and screen time is critical. How long an adolescent uses technology tells you nothing about whom they interact with, which communities structure their social life, what content they encounter, or whether they face support, coercion, exploitation, or behavioral reinforcement. Social-media research shows outcomes vary by individual traits, form of use, content, and platform [3,4]. Digital context is a psychosocial environment where social processes occur, not a behavioral exposure.

This matters for online victimization. Cyberbullying correlates with adverse mental-health outcomes [5]. Image-based and technology-facilitated sexual abuse involve coercion, nonconsensual distribution, and digitally mediated interpersonal harm [6–8]. These are clinically relevant.

The analysis will produce a crosswalk between conventional domains and digital environments. From this, a supplementary Digital Psychosocial Environment framework will be proposed. It won't advocate device inspection or account access. Instead, it identifies domains explorable through ordinary interviewing while preserving confidentiality, proportionality, developmental fit, autonomy, and privacy.

Digital environments are not intrinsically pathological. Online spaces provide connection, information, identity exploration, education, and community participation [3,4]. Assessment determines function, not pathology.

This work connects behavioral-health assessment with online-harms and social-cybersecurity research. Harms are often studied at platform and population levels. Clinicians encounter consequences at the individual level. Bridging this gap informs both assessment and understanding of how cyber-mediated harms show up in everyday life.

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