



In Between Community and Vulnerability

A Report on Digital Media
and Mental Ill-health among
Young Girls with NDD



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Summary

This report describes and analyses the link between self-estimated mental well-being and media use among young Swedish girls with mental disorders (MD) aged 13–18, particularly those with neurodevelopmental disorders (NDD) such as autism and ADHD. The report is primarily based on data collected in 2022 from Swedish children and young people as part of the survey Ungar & medier [Young People and Media] on media use and attitudes to media. The report is also part of the work to develop new knowledge within Safer Internet Centre Sweden (SIC), which is a knowledge centre at the Swedish Agency for the Media. The importance of children's perspectives and participation is emphasised within SIC in the implementation of the European strategy for a Better Internet for Kids (BIK+). The report shows that young girls with MD aged 13–18 have media habits that differ in many ways from other young people of the same age. The differences are clearly evident in the issue of time devoted to social media and digital devices such as computers, mobile phones and tablets. Girls with MD aged 13–18 use social media and digital devices for more time on average than other young people of the same age. The group of girls with MD aged 13–18 also contains the largest proportion of heavy users of social media in comparison with other young people of the same age. Over half of all girls with MD aged 13–18 who use social media also state that they spend three hours or more per day on social media. Girls with MD in the same age group also regularly socialise digitally with friends to a somewhat greater extent than girls of the same age without MD. Girls with MD aged 13–18 also state to a significantly higher extent than other young people of the same age that they have been exposed to different types of uncomfortable experiences on the internet. This could include, for example, having been bullied, receiving uncomfortable images on social media, or being asked by someone unknown to send naked pictures. This comparatively widespread vulnerability on the internet together with the heavy use of social media among girls with MD aged 13–18 also coincides with a high level of reduced mental well-being. Over half of all girls with MD aged 13–18 state in the survey that they suffer from four or more mental health issues, which constitutes the survey's definition of reduced mental well-being. This is a significantly larger proportion in comparison with other young people of the same age. These results are also largely confirmed by the results of previous research. When the link between these variables was analysed, correlations were found to exist, both between spending a lot of time on social media and having reduced mental well-being, and between vulnerability online and having reduced mental well-being. Because this concerns correlations, it is not possible to determine if vulnerability or time on social media leads to reduced mental well-being. The link instead mainly means that people who spend a lot of time on social media and/or are more vulnerable online also tend to have poorer mental health. However, the analysis shows that the link between vulnerability online and reduced mental well-being is statistically stronger than the link between time on social media and reduced mental well-being. This suggests that there may likely be a causal link between being vulnerable online and poor mental health, which should be given particular attention in future studies. In light of the

results presented in the report and previous research on digital media and children and young people with MD, it is concluded that digital media has a prominent place in the lives of many young girls with MD. Even if this is a group that also suffers from reduced mental well-being to a greater extent than other young people, it is difficult to say exactly how this reduced mental well-being is related to social media. As the analysis in this report shows, it may be that the relationship between mental ill-health and digital media among young girls with MD has more to do with the downsides of the internet, such as online bullying and sexual harassment, than with the actual amount of time they spend in digital environments. Both in this study and in previous research, there is also much to suggest that time in digital environments can be quite meaningful for young girls with MD, not least because young girls with MD socialise digitally with friends to a greater extent than other young people and may find it easier to create and maintain relationships on the internet than, for example, in school. For this reason, the report also proposes a holistic perspective in the work to design solutions to the problems that young girls with MD face, i.e., a perspective that can consider both the risks and the opportunities of digital media for young girls with MD.