



Help-seeking and Coping Strategies for Technology-facilitated Abuse Experienced by Youth

DIANA FREED, Brown University, USA

SUNNY CONSOLVO, Google, USA

DAN COSLEY, National Science Foundation, USA

PATRICK GAGE KELLEY, Google, USA

ENDER RICART, Google, USA

KURT THOMAS, Google, USA

NATALIE N. BAZAROVA, Cornell University, USA

Technology provides youth (ages 10–17) with near-constant opportunities for learning, communication, and self-expression. It can also expose them to technology-facilitated abuse: harassment, coercion, fraud, and more. The ability of youth to navigate such abuse is crucial for their well-being and development. A recent advisory by the U.S. Surgeon General called for better support of youth, including that youth should “reach out for help.” However, little is known about how youth seek help or otherwise cope with technology-facilitated abuse. Through a qualitative study in the U.S., we examine how youth engage in self-reliance, seek help from others, and how others seek help on a youth’s behalf. We discuss these strategies and outline opportunities for how the HCI community can better support youth who experience technology-facilitated abuse.

CCS Concepts: • **Security and privacy** → **Human and societal aspects of security and privacy**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Digital safety, help-seeking, coping, youth, teens, security, privacy, abuse

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Warning: This paper includes descriptions of and quotes about technology-facilitated abuse experienced by youth, including sexual abuse. Such material may be disturbing.

1 Introduction

Technology is part of the everyday lives of youth (10–17 years of age), providing them with near-constant opportunities for communication, self-expression, and learning [39, 42]. It also increasingly exposes them to technology-facilitated (“tech-facilitated”) abuse, such as cyberbullying and harassment [6, 24, 36], inappropriate content [24, 52, 71], sextortion [3, 22], and financial fraud [24, 43]. Youth need the ability to recognize such abuse to build resilience and avoid harm [49,

Authors’ Contact Information: Diana Freed, diana_freed@brown.edu, Brown University, USA; Sunny Consolvo, sconsolvo@google.com, Google, USA; Dan Cosley, dcosley@nsf.org, National Science Foundation, USA; Patrick Gage Kelley, patrickgage@acm.org, Google, USA; Ender Ricart, endericart@google.com, Google, USA; Kurt Thomas, kurtthomas@google.com, Google, USA; Natalie N. Bazarova, bazarova@cornell.edu, Cornell University, USA.

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73, 75]. To that end, a recent advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General emphasized the need to facilitate healthy and effective coping strategies for youth [48].¹

While that advisory suggests that the responsibility be shared across stakeholders—including policymakers, technology companies, researchers, families, and youth—the top recommendation for youth was to “reach out for help” and for parents to encourage youth “to seek help should they need it.”

Prior work has explored how and when youth seek help for specific types of tech-facilitated abuse (e.g., sexual abuse, cyberbullying, or harassment) [10, 28, 41, 61, 81] or mental health contexts (e.g., self-injury, eating disorders, depression, or anxiety) [37, 44, 58, 63, 66]. Among their findings are that youth often avoid seeking help from others due to stigma and fear of retaliation—preferring anonymous support channels (e.g., online peer support platforms or Reddit) and self-reliance. Prior work has also found that youth have been critical of how schools and tech companies address tech-facilitated abuse [4]. Still, they do sometimes seek help from others, and there are cases when others in youth’s social milieu—such as teachers, parents, or friends—initiate help-seeking on the youth’s behalf [9, 24]. Together, these findings point to the need to understand help-seeking as a dynamic and socially embedded process from a multi-stakeholder perspective.

In this paper, we describe how youth attempt to seek help for and cope with a wide range of tech-facilitated abuse: by relying on themselves, seeking help from others [57, 62], and/or by others initiating help on their behalf. Our broad view of help-seeking across a range of risks and experiences is consistent with recent socio-ecological approaches to understanding youth’s digital safety and well-being as a complex, multidimensional, and contextually embedded process [15, 24, 26, 72].

Given the interconnected nature of digital risks and vulnerabilities [69] and that help-seeking is ultimately a “social process,” [45] help-seeking and coping strategies depend on a youth’s social connections, relationships, and available resources [45, 74]. In particular, we build upon the ecological support approach [74] and the communal coping model [45], with an aim to unravel the social and contextual dynamics of help-seeking behaviors. By taking an ecological approach [74]—which emphasizes help-seeking as a dynamic transactional process between an individual and environment—and viewing our work through this lens, we seek to understand how youth become aware of, appraise, and choose between different support resources, as well as triggers for and deterrents from help-seeking.

Drawing from a qualitative study in the U.S. of youth and adults who support them, we examine:

RQ1: How do youth cope with tech-facilitated abuse?

RQ2: Under what circumstances do youth seek help from others?

RQ3: How do others initiate help on a youth’s behalf?

RQ4: What barriers are experienced when seeking help for and coping with abuse?

Our work contributes to the understanding of help-seeking and coping in the face of tech-facilitated abuse experienced by youth. First, we categorize the distinct help-seeking pathways youth employ in response to tech-facilitated abuse. This analysis provides a nuanced understanding of youth’s coping mechanisms and choices, as well as significant barriers that deter seeking help from others (e.g., fear of device confiscation, privacy invasion, and stigma). Second, we highlight a strong preference from youth for employing self-reliant strategies driven by a risk calculus they engage in. We find that this calculus is often flawed because youth tend to underestimate both risks of abuse and benefits of seeking help. Third, we underscore the critical issues of (a) abuse normalization among older youth, and (b) the lack of comprehension of abuse severity among younger youth. Finally, we also highlight challenges faced by adults who support youth, including a

¹The advisory refers to “young people,” which they define as being 13–17 years of age.

lack of understanding of newer forms of abuse, and that, in some cases, adults avoided help-seeking due to fears that they might be implicated or otherwise punished for a youth's behavior.

Additionally, through this research, we extend the reach of ecological and communal coping models [45, 74] to include situations of tech-facilitated abuse, providing new insights to understand the needs of individuals in such situations. Rather than treating help-seeking behaviors and resources as static attributes of the individual or environment, we chart the intersections between evaluations, behaviors, and resources, while also understanding how personal and ecological factors shape the help-seeking process. These complexities highlight the importance of tailored approaches over uniform treatments, both in understanding their coping behaviors and in designing systems, educational materials, and policies aimed at mitigating tech-mediated abuse.

2 Related Work

As technology is an integral part of the everyday lives of youth, it has also become a potential tool for abuse [70, 78]. Helping protect youth from tech-facilitated abuse has been identified as a critical issue [8, 40] of national and international concern [30, 47, 50]. Youth's interactions with individuals around the world—whether peers or strangers—and across various mediums have led to concerns about their exposure to abuse including unsolicited content, sexual violence, online harassment, cyberbullying, financial fraud, and mis/disinformation [24, 69].

Works exploring the nuanced nature of tech-facilitated abuse emphasize its impact on the well-being and mental health of youth, including increased risk of depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and even post-traumatic stress disorder [18, 29, 51, 60]. Recent work has called attention to the need for a broader focus on the potential harms and threats that youth experience [24, 43]. This necessitates developing and maturing digital-safety practices, including improving coping skills and help-seeking pathways for incidents of tech-facilitated abuse in order to stop it, mitigate its harms, and facilitate youth recovery and resilience.

2.1 Defining coping and help-seeking

Broadly speaking, *coping* refers to emotional, cognitive, or behavioral responses to deal with various stressors [67]. Some coping responses can overlap, especially for risky situations when people try to solve a problem while simultaneously minimizing negative emotional consequences arising from stressors. Coping responses can be adaptive or maladaptive, oriented toward self or others, and employ a variety of strategies ranging from seeking help, support, and advice from others to self-reliance, distraction, and escape [64, 67].

Help-seeking—a subcategory of coping—is an adaptive process aimed at obtaining assistance [62]. It refers to the actions taken by individuals to seek personal or psychological support, or social or health services, to meet their needs [9]. Help-seeking encompasses both formal sources, including physicians, lawyers, or counselors, and informal sources including peers and family [9]. Several factors influence the help-seeking behaviors of youth, including the amount of social support and quality of interpersonal relationships a youth has with the external support giver as well as age, digital skills, privacy concerns, and perceived stigma [38, 63, 69, 73].

2.2 Coping strategies and help-seeking for mental health

A primary context for examining youth help-seeking behaviors has been seeking help for mental health [44, 56], with some emphasis on how digital platforms and online communities may complement traditional sources of help. Online platforms often supplement traditional mental health services by offering a sense of community and peer support, which is crucial for the help-seeking process [82]. In the context of help-seeking for self-injury, a mixed-method study identified the prevalence and efficacy of help-seeking through mobile apps [37]. Anonymous support from the

community of peers who experienced similar struggles mitigated stigmatization concerns and was characterized by a higher frequency of emotional support seeking over other types of help solicitations [37]. Social media-based mental health support among college students is also prevalent, highlighting the importance of online communities in facilitating connections and sharing experiences [76]. As seen in the examples given here, digitally-based support systems offer a lower barrier to entry into support conversations, especially for stigmatized conditions such as mental health concerns [16, 37]. Digital solutions can play a role in fostering a sense of community and peer support, which is essential for mental health coping, especially through the help-seeking process.

A key difference between networks and mechanisms to support mental health versus tech-facilitated abuse is that support networks and mechanisms are currently more robust for mental health concerns. In the context of mental health, there are recognized health professionals, established treatment methods, and prescribed protocols for reporting and intervention [12]. Despite a growing focus on youth digital safety, we still lack a parallel set of best practices when it comes to youth exposure to tech-facilitated abuse, help-seeking pathways and interventions, and understanding of risk factors that increase vulnerabilities of different youth groups across diverse environments.

2.3 Coping strategies and help-seeking for tech-facilitated abuse

In light of the multi-threat, multi-platform, and multi-stakeholder landscape of tech-facilitated abuse, scholars have acknowledged the need to develop more effective coping strategies and help-seeking pathways to safeguard youth [7, 13, 23, 27, 65, 73, 79–81]. Prior research has emphasized the critical role of parental trust, control, and involvement [1, 27], as well as design frameworks aimed at parental intervention in adolescent smartphone use [2, 25, 34]. However, most prior studies of coping strategies and help-seeking have focused on individual platforms or individual stakeholder perspectives [28, 61, 81], rather than examining help-seeking as an interconnected process in response to various types of tech-facilitated abuse, which often span not only different platforms but also digital and physical contexts [24]. We bridge this gap by exploring youth help-seeking and coping strategies for tech-facilitated abuse from a cross-platform, multi-stakeholder perspective.

Help-seeking for tech-facilitated abuse is often stymied by some of the same socio-cultural effects (e.g., fear of stigmatization leading to preference for anonymous support channels) that affect mental health help-seeking. A study by Barlinska, Szuster, and Wisniewski [10] reported that targets of cyberbullying often refrain from seeking help due to perceived stigma and fear of retaliation. Other work found that the anonymous nature of the internet often intensifies the fear of not being believed [41]. We explore these barriers, alongside others, throughout this paper.

Perception of the effectiveness of formal resources also affects help-seeking. Pereira et al. explored help-seeking behaviors in the context of cyber-harassment victimization [54]. Their survey of adolescents (ages 12–16) in Portugal showed that less than half of adolescents sought help. The majority of help-seekers preferred to utilize informal resources, which were rated effective in terms of helpfulness; formal resources, on the other hand, were used in less than 7% of all help-seeking cases [54]. Informal help-seeking entailed leveraging internet-based informational resources and marshalling emotional support from others online, referred to as an “internet-coping strategy” [54]. These findings align with a previous Pew Research survey which found that adolescents were critical of how schools, social media companies, and politicians handled online harassment, seeing all adult stakeholders—except for parents—as falling short in effectively addressing this issue [6].

Another study, which examined youth coping for tech-facilitated abuse in Europe, mapped coping behaviors across two dimensions: technical-non-technical and engagement-disengagement [73]. For example, blocking and changing privacy settings were classified as technical and engaged

(proactive) strategies, while talking with parents or friends was a non-technical but still proactive and engaged strategy. Relevant for understanding help-seeking is that technical measures (blocking contacts, changing privacy settings, deleting images) were *self*-oriented and aimed at behavioral problem-solving, while non-technical strategies tended to be *other*-oriented (e.g., externalized help-seeking) and aimed at emotional support (e.g., talking with parents or peers). Furthermore, this study distinguished indifference as a passive coping approach (not caring about or ignoring digital risks or abuse) from behavioral avoidance, which is a non-technical and proactive coping strategy (e.g., going offline for a while). There were important age- and gender-related differences in the use of these coping strategies, which varied by types of digital risks. What was especially concerning is that younger children (10 years old and younger) were least equipped to seek help, as they tended to display avoidant or passive behaviors when encountering disturbing content online [41, 73].

2.4 Bridging environmental and social models of coping and help-seeking

The types of tech-facilitated abuse experienced by youth are incredibly diverse, as are their support needs. As such, it is important to understand how youth choose between different coping strategies and which factors are most influential in shaping (or inhibiting) youth help-seeking behavior. In doing this, we draw on environmental and social models of help-seeking that emphasize the context in which help-seeking takes place and possible drivers of youth's choices.

Vaux's ecological model prioritizes the dynamic, transactional process between an individual and their environment [74]. It illuminates the influence of surrounding systems—such as environmental and societal structures—on an individual's help-seeking behaviors. This model includes examining personal attributes, interpersonal relationships, and broader social and institutional contexts. Vaux emphasizes the need to map the interactions between these elements and understand the personal and ecological factors that shape the help-seeking process.

Rather than treating help-seeking behaviors and resources as static attributes of the individual or environment, our research builds on Vaux's ecological model to chart the intersections between risk evaluations, behaviors, and resources, while aiming to understand how personal and environmental factors shape help-seeking journeys. By taking an ecological approach, we seek to understand how youth become aware, appraise, and choose between different support resources, as well as triggers for and barriers from help-seeking. In the context of youth and tech-facilitated abuse, this perspective illuminates the centrality of an individual youth's role in help-seeking, in terms of whether they are cognizant of the abuse and available support resources, and how they evaluate the situation and choose among (or reject) the support resources available to them. The youth themselves serve as a primary gatekeeper over what coping strategy is employed—be that self-reliance or seeking help from others.

While Vaux's model emphasizes individual youth agency in a complex environment, Lyons' communal coping model [45] frames coping with challenges as a "social process" that draws in others (e.g., parents, peers, schools, mental health professionals) who confront the problem individually and together. Instead of individuals independently managing their own stress or challenges, communal coping involves a shared perception of the issue, collective action, and shared responsibility. Like other coping strategies, communal coping is not a straightforward, calculated, two-phase procedure of evaluation and action. Instead, it tends to be more complex, involving a series of iterative assessment-action cycles [45].

By drawing on Lyons' communal coping model [45], we examine the coordination, or lack thereof, between different support resources and efforts (e.g., parents, schools, mental health professionals, advocates, etc.), and different mechanisms and barriers for mobilizing these resources to prevent and mitigate harm from tech-facilitated abuse. Together, Vaux's and Lyons' models allow us to

view help-seeking around tech-facilitated abuse as both centered around the youth who experience and must cope with the abuse, while being shaped by the wider social context that both the abuse and help-seeking occur in.

3 Methodology

We use a data set collected by Freed et al. [24] that examined digital-safety experiences of youth. In this paper, we perform a new analysis on that data that focuses on help-seeking and coping strategies employed in response to the tech-facilitated abuse experienced by youth. Discussion guides for the semi-structured interviews included questions on help-seeking and how participants experienced and/or responded to tech-facilitated abuse. For example, questions explored when youth sought assistance, whom they approached for help, how they discovered available resources, actions they took in response to abuse, and coping strategies they chose. The dataset provided detailed accounts of help-seeking behaviors and coping strategies employed by youth and adults who support youth. We summarize the data collection methods detailed in Freed et al. [24] and describe how we performed our new analysis for the present study.

3.1 Participants (N=101)

The data set was collected from 36 youth and 65 adults who support youth from 13 states across the U.S. Each participant received a \$25 USD e-gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Youth. The 36 youth participants ranged from 10–17 years old. They were recruited via social service agencies or their schools. The youth who were recruited via social service agencies ($n=15$) received agency support due to observed or experienced child abuse, sexual violence, or domestic violence. Youth recruited via their schools either had or were experiencing tech-facilitated abuse ($n=10$), or were enrolled in school-organized programs that were focused on the cultivation of healthy interpersonal relationships ($n=11$). To recruit via schools, Freed et al.'s [24] lead researcher met with administrators and key personnel from the schools, extracurricular programs, school-initiated relationship wellness initiatives, and local community organizations. Outreach flyers were disseminated through these institutional channels, as well as via parental associations and a dedicated website focused on digital literacy aimed at middle-schoolers.

Youth participants resided in Arizona, California, Connecticut, New York, or Texas, and attended public ($n=33$) or private ($n=3$) school. Twenty-four identified as female, eight as male, and four as non-binary. Although Freed et al. did not specifically ask for socioeconomic status (SES) data from participants, such information was provided by the participating schools and programs. Three (8% of the youth participants) were from high socioeconomic backgrounds, 15 (42%) from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and 18 (50%) were from medium socioeconomic backgrounds.

Adults who support youth. The 65 adult participants were parents of youth ($n=19$) or adults who supported youth in a professional capacity ($n=46$)—that is, teachers, librarians, school nurses, mental health professionals, advocates, physicians, or lawyers. Adults from this diverse array of professional backgrounds were recruited based on conversations with schools, advocates, and community organizations that highlighted the wide variety of adults who frequently interact with youth, providing essential guidance, support, and resources across various facets of youth well-being. To recruit these adults, Freed et al. [24] promoted the study at events and to relevant groups, emailed those who expressed interest, distributed paper flyers, and advertised on the aforementioned website. Snowball sampling was also used based on referrals from other participants.

Adult participants resided in Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, or Wisconsin. Forty-eight identified as female, eleven as male, and six as non-binary.

3.2 Data collection

Data was collected from October 2021–May 2022 in interview and focus group sessions, during which several COVID-related restrictions were in place in the U.S. Sessions were conducted remotely via phone or video conference.

Youth. Ten semi-structured interviews and eight focus group sessions were conducted with the 36 youth participants. Each focus group consisted of three to six participants. Sessions began with the interviewer reviewing the consent form with participants. All youth participants were explicitly reminded that they were under no obligation to answer the interviewer’s questions, and that they could leave at any time without providing a rationale. Regardless of their decision, they were instructed that they would receive the thank-you gift. Thirty-four participants consented to their sessions being audio-recorded; for the other two, detailed session notes were taken.

Adults who support youth. The adult participant data came from semi-structured interviews with 57 participants and three focus groups with the other eight. Participants were given the choice to participate in either individual interviews or focus groups. Those who opted for focus groups were already acquainted with each other and voluntarily joined these groups. Sessions began with the same reminders youth participants received. Sixty-two adult participants consented to their sessions being audio-recorded; for the other three, detailed session notes were taken.

3.3 Analysis

In March and April 2023, we conducted a new analysis on Freed et al.’s dataset [24]. Our new analysis focused on help-seeking and coping strategies, primarily informed by data collected from the 36 youth participants about their experiences navigating tech-facilitated abuse. We used complementary insights offered by the 65 adult participants—who brought additional, valuable context—to enrich the youth-centric themes we uncovered.

Two coders analyzed the session transcripts and notes using an inductive thematic analysis approach [14]. The coders undertook a detailed review of all data and allowed initial codes relevant to help-seeking or coping strategies to emerge, and then proceeded with an independent analysis of the data. The coders convened frequently to reconcile codes and identify a unified codebook. Examples of codes that emerged included *self-reliance* and *barriers to help-seeking*. Finally, we grouped related codes to surface key themes that comprise the core of our results in Section 4.

3.4 Safety, privacy, & ethics

All study procedures were approved by an IRB. Several steps were taken to prioritize safety, privacy, and ethics. We summarize those steps here, and refer readers to [24] for further detail.

Preparations. Prior to meeting with youth participants, Freed et al. [24] spent several months engaging with advocates who helped review and refine session scripts and procedures.

Informed consent. Informed consent for youth participants who were recruited via social service agencies was obtained by advocates from those agencies prior to the youths’ participation in the research. Youth participants recruited via their schools were provided with a consent form from their school, organization, or parent. Before beginning each session, an additional verbal consent was obtained from youth participants. For adult participants, verbal consent was obtained, and they were provided with a copy of the consent form in advance of their sessions.

Participant safety. Each youth participant recruited via their school was able to have a certified mental health professional, other trusted adult from their educational or program setting, or a parent join their session. All youth participants recruited via social service agencies participated in

focus group sessions, per the procedures established during study preparations. Each youth focus group consisted of participants who knew each other, as well as one or two known, licensed mental health experts.

The identities of all youth participants recruited via social service agencies remained anonymous to the researchers: the video conferencing software used pseudonyms, and cameras were disabled. Adult participants had the option of remaining anonymous, but none of them exercised that option.

Data handling. To protect participants, we follow recommendations from Bellini et al. [11]. The names of collaborating organizations, educational institutions, and agencies have been withheld. All personally-identifiable information relating to the participants or individuals they mentioned were removed from session recordings, notes, and transcripts. When presenting results—and in particular, quotes—in this paper, we exclude specific details, expressions, terminology, and utterances to minimize the chance of identification. We do not attribute quotes to individual participant IDs. Instead, we identify the participant as belonging to one of two categories based on their age: 10–13 years old or 14–17 years old, corresponding to attendance in middle school and high school, respectively. These age divisions broadly align with developmental stages described in Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, reflecting the challenges and social contexts typical of early adolescence and later adolescence [21]. We’ve included quotes from 28 participants in this paper; no participant was quoted more than once.

3.5 Limitations

As with all research, this work has limitations. For example, participants were recruited from 13 states in the U.S. This approach might not have captured relevant experiences across different cultures, countries, or educational systems. Access to resources may vary based on location, both domestically and internationally. Additionally, although participants were recruited to include a wide range of experiences and perspectives, they may not represent *all* experiences and backgrounds. Key perspectives, such as non-parental caregivers, were not included in this work.

This work did not aim to compare experiences across different groups of youth; rather, the focus was to capture a broad range of experiences with help-seeking and coping strategies. Most of the youth and adult participants self-identified as female, which could create gaps in the findings, because tech-facilitated abuse affects all genders. The dataset was collected during the COVID-19 lockdown, which might have over-emphasized online behaviors and risks because youth’s use of technology increased during this period; that said, technology use has remained consistently high in subsequent years [5, 55, 59], an observation confirmed for this study group through followups with six adult participants in June 2024. Finally, standard limitations of self-reported data, including recall and observer biases, likely apply.

4 Results

We find that youth overwhelmingly cope with tech-facilitated abuse on their own, rather than seeking help from others. We examine their tendency towards self-reliance, circumstances in which they seek help from others, and situations when others initiate help-seeking on a youth’s behalf.

4.1 Coping with abuse through self-reliance

Youth participants tended to cope with tech-facilitated abuse on their own. Consistent with prior work that has shown that adolescence is a time when youth explore their identities, test boundaries, and establish autonomy [19, 20, 32], youth were often motivated to employ self-reliance to maintain their autonomy and privacy:

“I want to handle things privately without the whole world weighing in, unless it is something that goes too far.” – Youth, 14–17

Many youth participants expressed skepticism or frustration with adults who—despite trying to help—were seen as overbearing:

“My mom tracks what I do on my phone. She uses this thing from [our phone service provider] that checks my location, the activities I do on my phone, and how many calls I make. When things come up, I just want to handle them by myself.” – Youth, 10–13

However, in spite of the perceived upsides of self-reliance, its actual effectiveness depended on the type of tech-facilitated abuse the youth experienced, their awareness of when a situation was or could turn dangerous, knowledge of helpful protective practices, and the youth’s personal circumstances, among other factors. Here, we discuss the strategies youth participants employed and the barriers they faced when coping with abuse through self-reliance.

4.1.1 Self-reliant strategies. Youth employed a variety of self-reliant strategies when navigating tech-facilitated abuse. Prominent themes included leveraging platform-provided tools, enacting avoidance and distancing behaviors, and confronting perpetrators.

Platform-provided tools. Many tech platforms allow users to report abusive content or accounts to the platform and block or mute accounts. Such tools were used by youth to exercise (some) control over the tech-facilitated abuse they experienced. As a youth explained:

“My block list on Snapchat looks crazy. Somebody will add you ... Right after you add them [back], they will ask, ‘*Do you send nudes?*’ ... So I block people.” – Youth, 14–17

While youth often relied on platform-provided tools, they were aware that the tools had limitations. For example, youth pointed out that even if they blocked an account or reported it to the platform, the account owner could, and often did, reemerge with a new account on the same platform or get to the youth on a different platform:

“On social media, you can report somebody. That person could be removed from that app, but then get to you on another app. ... I know people whose accounts were reported; they made a new account [on the same app] just to connect back with somebody. We need a way to block the same person across accounts and platforms.” – Youth, 14–17

Avoidance and distancing. Avoidance and distancing behaviors—such as deleting content, removing an app from one’s device, or self-censoring what one shares—were frequently employed by youth to try to reduce the chances of experiencing harm. One youth recounted:

“I was playing on [the video game app] Roblox on my phone and tablet. I didn’t know what [a particular user] sounded like, but they were talking to me with the chat feature. I added them as a friend, and then they asked me ‘*What’s your name?*’ ‘*What school do you go to?*’ ‘*Where do you live?*’ I deleted them as a friend and decided to make a new account. But then I deleted Roblox because I got really uncomfortable.” – Youth, 10–13

While avoidance and distancing could be effective at preventing unwanted connections with perpetrators, they also hindered the ability of youth to participate in digital spaces.

Confronting perpetrators. Some youth directly confronted their perpetrators. For example, one described a situation where they demanded that their impersonator stop:

“I was impersonated on TikTok by someone who pretended to be me to beg for money. They used my picture, my name, and one of my popular videos, and then they were like ‘*I need money.*’ It took about a month for me to notice. Then I reached out to the

person who created the fake account, and I told them to delete everything.” – Youth, 14–17

Youth sometimes combined strategies, as in this example where a youth confronted a perpetrator who was making sexual advances toward them and others, then used a platform-provided tool to block the perpetrator:

“There was this guy who said he lived nearby; he came off as super cool. And then he started getting creepy and overly aggressive. I found out that he was some older guy who catfished girls. Once I found out, I yelled at him, then blocked him—you know, good for me.” – Youth, 10–13

In that example, the youth was proud that they were able to deal with the perpetrator on their own, in a way they thought was effective. However, they did not recognize the dangers of this encounter and subsequently did not notify an adult.

4.1.2 Barriers. Though youth tended to prefer being self-reliant when responding to tech-facilitated abuse, self-reliance worked poorly when youth failed to recognize that they were experiencing abuse, or did not know how to adequately respond to it.

Recognizing abuse. To effectively handle tech-facilitated abuse—especially via self reliance—youth needed to recognize that they were experiencing abuse. Yet in some contexts, such as grooming or the lead-up to sextortion, youth believed they were participating in healthy, romantic interactions when they were actually experiencing early stages of tech-facilitated sexual abuse:

“Something will happen online where, once a relationship has been established, the perpetrator will say to the youth, ‘*Send me more pictures now or I’m going to send the pictures that I have to your family members.*’ That’s sextortion. ... I see it as a breaking point when there are actual threats, and the youth realizes, ‘*Oh no! This person is not being the loving, caring, nice person they used to be.*’” – Advocate

This failure to recognize abuse also can occur in cases of teen dating violence, where the signs of abuse can be subtle and normalized within the relationship.

“I didn’t realize he was being abusive because I thought it was normal for someone to get jealous and angry in a relationship. He would text me all the time and get mad if I didn’t answer right away or show him my phone.” – Youth 14–17

Knowing how to respond. Once youth recognized that they were experiencing tech-facilitated abuse, they needed to determine if and how to respond—including whether they believed they could handle the situation on their own. In this example, a youth explains how they tried to use platform-provided tools to cope with abuse from an ex-boyfriend.

“My ex-boyfriend was trying to get to me. There is really no way to fully block him because we go to the same school. ... He was constantly making new accounts and just trying to *be* on me. I tried to block his account, but then he made a new account and started messaging me from there. ... Instagram has a feature now that lets you block a person and any new accounts that they create. I feel like that’s a good feature, but I don’t think it’s effective, or I don’t know what exactly that feature is referencing when they say ‘*any new accounts they might make.*’ My cousin told me to get a restraining order. I’ve known two other people who got restraining orders against their ex or somebody who was trying to do them harm in real life and over social media, but [my ex and I] go to the same school.” – Youth, 14–17

Although the tools were helpful, they did not stop the abuse. The youth sought help from a family member (a strategy covered in Section 4.2), who suggested getting a restraining order. But since the youth and their ex attended the same school, that did not seem to be a reasonable option. The youth did not know what else to do.

4.2 Asking others for help

Youth participants who reached out to others for help often did so after the self-reliant strategies they employed did not resolve the abuse. One youth shared the inflection point that led to their seeking help from friends:

“Somebody contacted me like 20 times during the night. I blocked them, and then deleted them. But it happened to me more than five times. ... I would get messages asking me to send pictures in return for money. And obviously I am young, so I was freaked out. I didn’t know how to handle the situation. I told my friends about it. [My friends and I] decided I should make my accounts private.” – Youth, 14–17

The most prevalent type of tech-facilitated abuse for which youth sought help involved attacks on their social or individual identity, or physical and sexual safety. Examples included ongoing bullying, grooming, sexual harassment, and sextortion, among others.

Below, we discuss strategies youth employed when seeking help from others and the barriers they faced when doing so. As we will see, a key element of deciding whether to reach out for many youth was a *risk calculus* that weighed the possibility that harm from the abuse would escalate against the loss of agency they perceived they would experience *and* the potential repercussions they could face from involving others (e.g., suffering reputational damage or being punished).

4.2.1 Help-seeking strategies. Youth sought help from others online and/or offline. They reached out to friends, peers, parents, other family members, teachers, advocates, and even authorities (e.g., school officials or law enforcement). Who youth confided in depended on social norms as well as dynamics within their individual social networks. They tended to seek *actionable guidance*, *emotional or sense-making support*, or *someone to intervene* with escalating or severe abuse.

Seeking actionable guidance. When youth did not know how to respond to tech-facilitated abuse or when their attempts at self-reliance were not effective, they often asked friends, parents, or advocates for advice on what to do:

“I was 15 when I was sexually harassed online. I was frequently chatting [with the perpetrator]. She was always promising to take me out and give me money and other stuff *if* I sent her pictures of myself. She said she was 19. I felt intimidated, and I asked her to stop. She wouldn’t. So I reported it to my mom, and together, we blocked her.” – Youth, 14–17

This communal coping strategy underscores the importance of social support in managing stress, particularly for youth facing online harassment. By involving a trusted adult, the youth not only found an effective solution to the immediate problem but also learned the value of seeking help and collaborating with others in times of distress. Youth shared with us that these experiences strengthened their confidence in their ability to cope with future challenges, knowing they have a reliable support system to turn to.

Seeking emotional or sense-making support. In some instances where youth reached out to adults (e.g., parents, guardians, or advocates), those adults provided emotional and sense-making support to help the youth navigate abuse, as in this example from one of our adult participants:

“[A youth] would show me the threatening messages she received from her perpetrator ... I think doing that really helps them process what’s going on, work on self-esteem issues, and then once they have processed enough, they have the ability to delete those messages and physically see that the messages aren’t there anymore. After we made sense of everything *on her time*, she chose to block her perpetrator. I didn’t even have to bring up the idea of blocking him.” – Advocate

In this example, the advocate provided crucial emotional and cognitive support, helping the youth to process the harassment and regain a sense of control. Advocates shared that this sense-making support allows the youth to understand the situation better and make informed decisions about how to handle it. The communal support from others, in this case the advocate, provides a guardrail while creating the time and space for youth to process experiences, reinforcing their self-efficacy in coping with abuse.

Seeking someone to intervene. Youth—often in partnership with their parents or advocates—sometimes reached out to their schools, mental health practitioners, or law enforcement, asking for help with cases of escalating or severe abuse:

“[My child] sent a picture of herself to a boy, and he showed it to some friends. Then other kids started calling [my child] a ‘*whore*’ and all kinds of other names. I called some parents to try to intervene. One girl seemed to be a ringleader [of the abuse]. My daughter blocked [the ringleader and some other girls] so they couldn’t send my daughter messages through Snapchat. But those girls then used someone else’s Snapchat account who *could* message my child. And it would happen again. So we reported [the abuse] to the school.” – Parent

At times a multifaceted approach was required to try to mitigate the abuse. Initially, the parent attempted to address the issue directly by contacting other parents, reflecting a proactive effort to mitigate the abuse within the community. When this strategy proved insufficient, the parent and child resorted to blocking the perpetrators, a step that provided temporary relief. However, recognizing the limitations of their actions and the persistence of the abuse, they escalated the matter by involving the school, that is, seeking institutional support. This progression illustrates the dynamic nature of communal coping, where the initial shared efforts between parent and child expand to include broader community resources, highlighting the importance of collaborative and multi-level interventions in effectively addressing escalating abuse.

These experiences illustrate how youth can encounter persistent challenges when dealing with abuse, even after seeking help from trusted adults and institutions. For instance, another participant shared a similar ordeal:

“I was on social media and other kids began making fun of my weight and called me terrible names. I tried to handle it by blocking them, but then they would call me names in person at school. They still found ways to message me using another person’s account. I told my mom, and we reported it to the school, but the issue persisted and the school basically said it wasn’t their problem because it was happening outside of school. I would go to the nurse’s office as I just wanted to get out of there. I was scared.”
– Youth, 14–17

Parents shared feelings of frustration and helplessness in situations when communal coping efforts failed to stop persistent bullying. Despite taking proactive steps, such as blocking and reporting the incidents to the school, the harassment continued. The school’s refusal to intervene due to the off-campus nature of the abuse underscores a significant gap in addressing cyberbullying.

demonstrating the need for more robust and inclusive support systems that extend beyond school boundaries.

4.2.2 Barriers. In spite of the benefits that youth experienced when they sought help from others, they tended to view help-seeking with skepticism due to a fear of repercussions, adults being seen as ‘out-of-touch’ or powerless, and the sense that tech-facilitated abuse is a normal part of life.

Fear of repercussions. Many youth participants feared they would experience repercussions, including reputational damage or punishment, if they sought help from others. A common reputational concern was the social blow-back they could face if they reached out for help, especially to an adult. They were particularly concerned about being seen as ‘a snitch’ or ‘too immature’ to handle situations on their own:

“[Regarding] the whole topic of [reaching out to] somebody when there’s an actual problem—I just feel like it’s really hard to distinguish when you are snitching and when you are not. The thing about snitching is that there’s a stigma around it. If you snitch, you are basically snitching against the kids. It’s a bad thing to snitch.” – Youth, 14–17

Youth also feared being punished if they reached out for help. Both youth and educators shared examples of when the fear that a parent might restrict a youth’s access to devices—either by physically seizing the device or installing parental controls—affected if and how youth sought help:

“A seventh grade student approached me during class, and we stepped out in the hallway. She told me about how she was on Facebook. This person had friended her and a bunch of other people in her community. He contacted her to video chat, and then he flashed her [with his genitalia]. She didn’t know what to do about it. She worried that if she told her parents, they would take away her phone.” – Teacher

This fear of being punished extended to situations where youth perceived themselves to be at fault, even if only partially. For example, one youth described how after consensually sharing an explicit image, that image was later shared by someone without the youth’s consent. But since the youth originally shared the image *consensually*, they blamed themselves for what happened and avoided seeking help:

“I remember feeling like it was all my fault. I was the one who decided to send that picture [originally]. I felt anxious about the consequences I might face ... It made me feel like I couldn’t tell anyone. Like, how could I? I was the one who did something wrong in the first place. It was scary and lonely. My parents finally found out from a friend’s parents, then [my parents] took my phone.” – Youth, 10–13

As that example shows, even though that youth did not seek help after experiencing sexual abuse, they were still punished by their parents when their parents found out what happened from someone else’s parents (something we discuss more in Section 4.3). Fears like these help to illustrate the risk calculus youth engage in to decide if and how they will reach out for help.

Belief that adults are ‘out-of-touch’ or powerless. Many youth expressed skepticism that adults would adequately understand the tech-facilitated abuse they experienced or have the power to meaningfully address it. As these two youth participants shared:

“My parents are always like, ‘If someone’s mean to you online, just report it [to the platform],’ but they don’t get how complicated that is. They think you just hit a ‘report’ button, and that solves everything. They don’t understand the drama, and they’re clueless about how some people make fake accounts and stuff.” – Youth, 14–17

“I mean, you *could* report [abuse] to the platform, but it’s not really gonna do much. Like when your account gets reported on social media, somebody has to report it. [The platforms] have to find something super wrong to actually take it down. So the only thing you really can do is block [abusive accounts]. I could tell my mom about [the abuse], but there isn’t anything she can do about it because you can’t really tell who the person [behind the abusive account] is to give them an actual consequence. My mom *could* try to talk to [the platform], but they can just not answer her.” – Youth, 14–17

This highlights the complex and nuanced nature of digital abuse that youth navigate, as they shared that adults do not fully grasp the intricacies involved. Adults’ perceived lack of understanding about the circumstances of abuse, reporting mechanisms, and the aftermath significantly shapes youths’ decisions regarding when and from whom to seek help.

From the adult perspective, there is often a lack of awareness about the detailed dynamics of online interactions and the limitations of platform governance. Adults tend to advocate for straightforward actions such as reporting abuse, without recognizing the broader context and potential repercussions that youth experience.

Belief that abuse is simply part of life. Many youth shared beliefs that tech-facilitated abuse is commonplace. They have accepted that it is just part of life—something all youth experience—which often led to their not seeking help from others. As one youth participant indicated, “*It’s normal to us.*” Some youth appeared to be desensitized to this “normal” abuse. For example, a youth explained sexual solicitations they received from an adult on social media as if it were a casual occurrence:

“Some guy actually messaged me, asking to be my sugar daddy or something, so I blocked him. He looked super, super old. ... I just deleted [his message] because [stuff like that] actually happens pretty often.” – Youth, 14–17

In cases like these, youth sometimes wondered if the abuse they experienced was “bad enough” to warrant seeking help from others. Many explained that sexual solicitations from adults on social media felt like casual occurrences, raising concerns from adult stakeholders about the normalization and desensitization to abuse.

4.3 Others initiating help on a youth’s behalf

While less common than self reliance or youth asking others for help, sometimes a third party would initiate help-seeking on the affected youth’s behalf. For example, youth participants described teachers or social workers who stepped in upon observing signs of abuse, peers who stepped in to help a friend, or even how accidental disclosures of abuse sometimes led to help. In such cases, help was not summoned directly by the youth navigating the abuse, but indirectly by the community around them [45]. While the strategies were similar to when youth asked for help, these interventions by third parties often provided youth with help while circumventing some of the barriers that inhibited youth from reaching out themselves. Here, we discuss how third parties got involved in seeking help on behalf of the affected youth and the barriers they or the youth faced.

4.3.1 How third parties got involved. Third parties often played a critical role in identifying signs of struggle, distress, or unmet needs among youth experiencing tech-facilitated abuse. We discuss common circumstances in which third parties sought help on the affected youth’s behalf including advocates who proactively monitored for indications of abuse, peers who intervened after observing abuse, and cases when accidental disclosure of abuse led to help.

Advocates who proactively monitored for abuse. Some advocates, such as teachers and social workers who often work in schools, shared how they worked proactively to build trust with youth and monitored for signals that might indicate a youth was experiencing tech-facilitated abuse. They shared that youth came to them when issues arose and that they were able to help youth mitigate abuse when issues emerged. This was particularly true for youth who received formal support from advocates:

“As a professional who [works with] ‘*vulnerable youth*,’ I understand that ...these youth are more prone to trafficking, exploitation, or being targeted by predators, either in-person or online ...I look for the signs that help me think of what could be happening in their lives. This approach helps me be alert to potential issues they might encounter online.” – Social Worker

This proactive approach underscores the importance of early detection and intervention in protecting vulnerable youth from tech-facilitated abuse.

Peers who intervened after observing abuse. Some youth participants expressed that they considered intervening to help another youth who was experiencing tech-facilitated abuse *if* they determined that the abuse they observed passed their personal threshold of harm. These youth described weighing the potential consequences of intervening (including how doing so would impact them personally) against the obligation they felt to help a peer in need:

“If I see something really bad going on, then I am going to say something. If I see something where someone is going to get hurt, then obviously I’m going to tell someone.”
– Youth, age 14–17

Nevertheless, such peer-initiated help-seeking was ad hoc.

Accidental disclosure. Participants described many instances where affected youth received help after a parent or other adult “accidentally” learned about tech-facilitated abuse from the affected youth, the youth’s sibling, another peer, or a neighbor:

“A lot of the time, parents find out [that their child is experiencing abuse] through accidental disclosure. ...A younger sibling might say to their parents, ‘*Hey, so and so’s friend came over the other day again.*’ And the parents will be like, ‘*What friend?*’ ...or neighbors will tell the parents that they have seen suspicious activities ...And then the parents will go through the [youth’s] cell phone and realize that the youth has had really inappropriate conversations with some random stranger online.” – Advocate

In such accidental disclosures, ‘help’ is summoned not directly by the youth navigating the abuse, but indirectly by the collective community [45] concerned about the youth’s well-being.

4.3.2 Barriers. When a third party initiates help on a youth’s behalf, it could provide important assistance to youth who were unaware of how dangerous their situation was or for those who might need help, but whose risk calculus led them to decide not to seek it. However, third parties did not always know how to respond to the abuse they observed or learned about, and there were circumstances where the affected youth (and sometimes even their parents) were not receptive to the help. We examine these barriers below.

Knowing how to help. Many adults who attempted to initiate help on a youth’s behalf struggled to understand the tech-facilitated abuse youth encountered. While youth participants readily understood abuse-related terms like *cyberflashing*, *airdrop*, and *deepfakes*, most adult participants did not. They often asked for explanations or clarifications regarding the meaning of those and other terms, and they inquired about basic concepts such as how a particular piece of technology

might be used to cause harm. Parents often readily admitted that their lack of knowledge posed a meaningful barrier to understanding how to respond to abuse:

“When it comes to resources, I’m at a loss. I would love it if there were an app where I could just press a button and remove whatever I wanted from [my child’s] phone. [I’d be] like, ‘*Nope. You can’t use Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter until tomorrow morning.*’ I would love an app like that. I would love something I could control from my own phone, so that I wouldn’t have to take [my child’s] phone and fight with them.” – Parent

Some teachers suggested that providing awareness and skills around coping with tech-facilitated abuse might be best tackled formally and in a systemic way—possibly through educational or governmental institutions—rather than leaving it up to people to figure it out for themselves.

“The big thing is the lack of resources in terms of education on digital safety because not a lot of parents know that there are things you can do to prevent your children from accessing some sites and dangerous apps. I think addressing the issue before it becomes a problem is something that really needs to happen in terms of the legislature... Digital safety education should be part of a school-wide curriculum or event that parents and children must attend.” – Teacher

Competing interests.

Third party-initiated help was not always appreciated by the affected youth. Help that they did not choose to seek could compete with their self-interest (e.g., they might view it as an invasion of their privacy or unwelcome restriction to their autonomy), or the youth might not recognize what they were experiencing as being abuse.

“He would call her names and threaten her. When she was at home, he would sometimes text her nonstop. The problem was no matter how often people tried to intervene, she would still stay with him despite the abuse she reported to us [friends].” – Youth, 14–17

The affected youth’s parents sometimes did not appreciate when others initiated help-seeking on their child’s behalf, particularly if law enforcement or other governmental agencies (e.g., child protective services) were brought in. One advocate shared how parents might not cooperate with an investigation of abuse if they were aware of “compromising material” on their child’s device, especially if the material was not relevant to the abuse.

“Unfortunately, there are the parents who know that their children are doing something [unrelated to the] abuse [in question], you know, texting about illegal substances, meeting up with people to share drugs, and stuff like that. And so the parents ... don’t want their children to get into more trouble ... And so that’s why they’re afraid.” – Advocate

Mirroring barriers from Section 4.2, these parents feared the repercussions they or their child might face for that material, particularly when law enforcement got involved and wanted access to the child’s phone to investigate the abuse.

5 Discussion

Overall, our findings identify youth as active agents in coping with the tech-facilitated abuse they experience. When they perceive that a situation is abusive *and* believe they have the tools, skills, or knowledge to handle it themselves, they prefer to do so. Youth consider seeking help from others when they do not know what to do, their self-reliant strategies did not work, or they perceive the abuse as too dangerous or pervasive to deal with on their own. The kind of help they seek tends to

Category	Strategies	Barriers
Self-reliance	Using platform-provided tools	Recognizing and reporting abuse
	Avoidance and distancing behaviors	Not understanding potential harms
	Confronting perpetrators	Knowing how to effectively respond
Seeking help from others	Actionable guidance	Fear of repercussions
	Emotional support	Perception of adults as out-of-touch
	Asking others to intervene	Belief that abuse is normal
Help initiated by others	Proactive monitoring of signs of abuse	Fear of repercussions
	Peers observing abuse	Advice perceived as non-actionable
	Accidental disclosure of potential abuse	Desire for autonomy and/or privacy
		Help is unwanted or seen as not needed

Table 1. Summary of strategies employed and barriers experienced when seeking help or coping with tech-facilitated abuse experienced by youth

focus on actionable advice or emotional support that will help them be self-reliant, rather than wanting to rely on others to intervene on their behalf.

We summarize our findings in Table 1, outlining the strategies youth employ and the barriers they encounter. When youth employ self-reliance, they often use platform-provided tools, engage in avoidance and distancing behaviors, and sometimes confront perpetrators directly. However, they face barriers like not recognizing the potential severity of harms that might result and not knowing how to respond to the abuse effectively to protect themselves from further harm. In seeking help from others, youth look for actionable guidance, emotional support, and intervention from others, but they are often hindered by fears of repercussions, perceptions of adults as out-of-touch, and the normalization of abuse. When help is initiated by others, it typically comes when people in a youth's community proactively observe signs of abuse or of abusive behavior itself, although sometimes concerns about abuse are raised accidentally, in the context of other interactions with friends, family, or other adults. The barriers that arise around help from others include fear of repercussions, advice seen as non-actionable, a desire for autonomy and privacy, and help being unwanted or perceived as unnecessary.

When and how youth seek help depends on a complex calculus of perceived benefits and risks. Sometimes this calculus points to not seeking help because youth perceive the risk as too high. These risks include fear of repercussions—such as being seen as a snitch by peers, or being punished by parents or other authorities—or fear that they would lose the limited privacy they possessed. Other times, this calculus points to not seeking help from others because youth perceive the benefits as insufficient. These insufficient benefits included youths' belief that external sources of support would be ineffective, unsympathetic, or unknowledgeable.

Youth also sometimes underestimate or downplay the potential harms involved with tech-facilitated abuse. Our analysis revealed that younger youth (10–13 years of age) often fail to identify certain situations as being abusive. This age group, being in late childhood to early adolescence [20], is beginning to understand more complex social interactions, but may not fully grasp the implications of tech-facilitated abuse. Although these youth may react to the encounter by disconnecting from a platform or limiting the information they share with a perpetrator, they tend to not inform an adult or report the abuse. Meanwhile, older youths (14–17 years of age) sometimes normalize tech-facilitated abuse, considering it to simply be part of life. This, too, appears to influence whether they will seek help from others.

Beyond youths' own help-seeking, others sometimes seek help on a youth's behalf. This can take the form of advocates who see part of their job as looking out for tech-facilitated abuse, or the form of another youth reaching out to adults on behalf of a peer, or directly encouraging their peer to seek help. Help is also sometimes accidental, such as when others inadvertently become aware of a potentially abusive situation. This kind of externally-initiated help is not always appreciated by youth who seek to maintain their autonomy and privacy—and youth are sometimes correct that well-intentioned helpers do not have the necessary knowledge or authority to help.

Implications. We found that concerns around agency and privacy—critical to a youth's social identity and development—led youth to primarily manage tech-facilitated abuse on their own before seeking help from others, if at all. Centering youth needs, as advocated by prior work [43, 73], remains central to bridging the gap between self-reliant strategies and the valuable support that external help resources—such as familial networks, educational institutions, peer networks, and law enforcement—can provide.

This suggests the need for the development of tailored, age-appropriate educational and intervention strategies. These strategies should empower youth at different developmental stages to recognize, understand, and effectively respond to tech-facilitated abuse. Enhanced awareness, resource creation sensitive to youths' developmental needs, and environments encouraging open discussion would likely be useful. Such approaches should aim to help youth recognize abuse, or that a situation might become abusive, as well as to de-normalize tech-facilitated abuse and equip youth with effective digital safety support.

One concrete implication of this is that helpers, help processes, and help resources should be concerned not just with *dealing with* tech-facilitated abuse, but with *helping youth increase their coping skills*—that is, the skills needed to recognize and deal appropriately with situations involving tech-facilitated abuse. For example, one parent in this study worked with their child to help them block a concerning contact; in the process, the youth likely learned about how to handle similar situations in the future, as well as being assured that their parent was willing and able to help them when they needed it. Reporting processes, advocacy organizations, and digital literacy interventions all could benefit from thinking about how their designs and resources could help youth build their coping skills.

Helping youth develop coping skills should be approached with a nuanced and developmentally appropriate perspective. For younger children, particularly those in early adolescence (ages 10–13), seeking help from others should probably be emphasized. At this stage, they need more guidance and support to recognize and respond to tech-facilitated abuse effectively. As youth mature into middle to late adolescence (ages 14–17), they should gradually be encouraged to develop self-reliance skills, understanding that self-reliance should increase with age. This creates a coping continuum between help-seeking and self-reliance, where older youth become more adept at managing situations independently while still knowing when to seek help from others. In severe cases of abuse, immediate intervention and management take priority, as formal systems may have legal, protective, or policy goals that need to be addressed. However, as a general approach, designing interventions that support older youth in becoming more self-reliant, while ensuring they know when and how to seek help from others, will be crucial in addressing tech-facilitated abuse effectively.

Re-enforce that tech-facilitated abuse should not be normalized. Youth's belief that some tech-facilitated abuse was just a normal part of life that 'everyone faces' sometimes skewed their calculus for when to seek help. Throughout this research, participants of all ages normalized abuse and did not seek help or take action when they did not recognize the interactions as problematic or

a potential threat to their safety. For example, youth with repeated exposure to sexual solicitation—such as frequent requests for nude images—resulted in their minimizing the associated harm of such interactions.

This is consistent with a survey study showing that repeated exposure to violent pornography may lead to normalization of aggression or violence in sex acts, sex without consent, as well as unrealistic body images [53].

Thus, re-enforcing that tech-facilitated abuse is not, nor should it be considered, “normal” can help youth make more informed choices about both coping and help-seeking strategies. The normalization of abuse underscores the need for improved educational efforts to raise awareness about the seriousness of tech-facilitated abuse and the available support options.

Here, it may be instructive to consider precedents set by public health communication campaigns that have effectively recalibrated people’s perceptions to align more closely with actual behaviors. One archetypal example is that of intervention programs designed to correct misperceptions about alcohol consumption among college students [77]. These interventions helped students align their views of “typical” drinking behavior with empirical realities, thereby fostering healthier decision-making. Extending this framework to digital environments presents an opportunity to explore novel interventions that could help calibrate youth perceptions of the riskiness and potential abusiveness of online behaviors.

Helping youth develop coping skills should include helping them recognize when they are experiencing abuse or something wrong. It is crucial to bring nuance to existing literature by highlighting that coping skills must start with helping youth recognize red flags when their experiences are problematic or abusive. Prior recommendations haven’t fully addressed the issue, indicating an unmet need that persists despite changes in behavior and technology.

Expand resources to achieve an ecology of care. Our results suggest that any mitigation to tech-facilitated abuse needs to consider not just youth, but also the ecology of care that both surrounds and co-constitutes the youth’s ability to successfully deal with abuse. Returning to Vaux’s ecological approach [74] and Lyons’ communal coping framework [45], we see elements of both in our results.

Aligned with Vaux’s ecological approach [74] that emphasizes help-seeking as a dynamic, transactional process between an individual and environment, we found that help-seeking among youth was influenced by how they became aware of and appraised different support resources, along with youth’s own triggers for and deterrents from help-seeking. As a precursor to incentivizing youth to engage in help-seeking, the environment that supports youth who experience tech-facilitated abuse should be holistically considered and improved.

These improvements might include making help more available and salient. For instance, advocates, who proactively help youth think about whether their digital experiences are abusive, provide youth with an entry point for reaching out for help they might not have realized they wanted or needed, and as a bonus, may help youth think better about boundaries between negative—*but normal*—interactions and abusive ones. Several participants also noted the potential for schools to engage in more proactive and regular digital literacy and skill-building education around tech-facilitated abuse. Platforms could perhaps do something similar—and in some recent cases, already have [46]—using tools designed to detect concerning content as the basis for interventions that, when appropriate, help youth reflect on an interaction or relationship, and to introduce them to tools for self-reliant action around it, or resources to reach out to for help and support.

Additionally, communal coping [45] provides a lens to understanding that help-seeking can be a shared endeavor. This form of coping, characterized by a collective acknowledgment of a problem and a joint commitment to tackling it, could encompass actions taken by peer groups,

families, and communities. Given the involvement of multiple stakeholders, it becomes apparent that addressing tech-facilitated abuse requires a flexible, multi-tiered support system. This system should be adaptable to various help-seeking methods and responsive to the changing experiences of youth and the evolving implications of new technologies (such as social VR, connected devices, and generative AI).

Minimize repercussions from seeking help. Another concern in designing help-seeking ecologies is the need to reduce potential negative consequences of help-seeking, which often led youth to conclude that seeking help might be worse than dealing with tech-facilitated abuse on their own. Some grappled with complex feelings of inadequacy and self-blame when it came to abuse, whereby seeking help posed a reputational risk due to exposing mistakes the youth had made. Others feared overreactions from parents or schools that might result in their losing access to autonomy around their digital lives. Youth also feared backlash due to being considered a ‘snitch’ if they reported tech-facilitated abuse, particularly in school environments that involved regular interaction with peers.

These findings call for strategies that reduce the likelihood of extreme or disproportionate repercussions; we see those strategies as grounding in preserving privacy and building trust. On the side of privacy, anonymous or pseudonymous digital spaces, as described in the related work, may create safer spaces for youth to explore help-seeking. Sometimes actors in the broader ecosystem of care need to reach out to other sources of help (for instance, school officials reaching out to parents or law enforcement); in those cases, guidelines to share the minimum necessary amount and detail of information that youth reveal in the course of help-seeking may reduce the risk of repercussions.

Such guidelines would also be part of a broader constellation of strategies designed to increase trust between youth and the adults who support them. Having more regular interaction between help-givers outside of the context of specific incidents; more clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and reporting processes; and being more transparent about those processes and their outcomes are all general, but useful strategies for reducing the risks associated with help-seeking.

Care must be taken in thinking about these strategies, however, to make sure they don’t impose negative consequences of their own. For example, on the surface, tools that allow anonymous reports of potential abuse should reduce the risks youth perceive around reporting tech-reported abuse to either themselves or others, which in principle should increase their willingness to report abuse.

Still, third party reporting can conflict with the agency and privacy goals of the youth who are being “helped,” while the subjects of reports might still be able to infer the reporter’s identity in some situations. Further, anonymous reporting mechanisms could be used themselves as a tool of abuse through false accusations [33].

Expand digital literacy around tech-facilitated abuse. Finally, our findings showed that youth and the adults who support them often lacked knowledge about both the risks surrounding tech-facilitated abuse and the help resources, protective tools, and actions available to them. Adults, in particular, often lacked awareness of potential abuses or terminology to describe them, and all parties sometimes had trouble assessing their (potential) severity.

On the resources and actions side, both youth and adults also sometimes lacked awareness or had misconceptions about what help was available, how it worked, and how effective it really could be. Information about abuses, responses, and help sources was often not available, complete, or salient when it was needed.

Together, this calls for a need to emphasize digital literacy training for youth and—separately but equally important—their adult support networks.

Recognizing youths' needs for agency and preference toward self-reliance, coping skills training might lean into the tools platforms already provide (blocking, hiding, reporting), framing these tools as potential resources. Training mechanisms that don't just talk about the tools, but allow youth to practice and reflect on using them through experiential learning-based [35] platforms like *Social Media TestDrive* [17, 83] may be especially apt for youth, for whom risk coping is to a large extent a byproduct of risk taking from the developmental standpoint [31, 68]. These trainings, however, should also make youth aware of the limitations of platform tools in terms of both the circumstances in which they are appropriate and their limitations in addressing the abuse (e.g., through perpetrators getting around contact blocking via other accounts or platforms), and when it is appropriate to lean on their support network of parents, counselors, and other adults who are in a position to offer help, especially for younger youth and for all youth when dealing with persistent abuse.

At the same time, adults who support youth would benefit from a digital literacy education to have a broader understanding of coping skills for tech-facilitated abuse, potential signs and symptoms of abuse, and how best to engage with youth given their reluctance towards seeking help from adults. Gains here can meaningfully address youth's concern that adults are powerless to help, or out of touch with the realities of tech-facilitated abuse and its harms. As mentioned by advocates who participated in this study, such resources might be made available through concerted digital literacy campaigns provided via schools or other institutions.

6 Conclusion

Technology-facilitated abuse experienced by youth constitutes a public health crisis with potentially serious repercussions, including life-changing psychological or physical harm [48, 50]. This paper provides insights into how present-day youth (aged 10–17) in the U.S. cope with tech-facilitated abuse, providing important insights into when and under what circumstances they might seek help from others.

We identified three primary pathways through which youth cope with tech-facilitated abuse: self-reliance, seeking help from others, and when others initiate help on the youth's behalf. Youths' preference for self-reliance often stemmed from a risk calculus where they weighed the potential for escalated harm from the abuse against the loss of autonomy and possible repercussions.

Our results show that the utility of self-reliance and external help-seeking as coping strategies are both dependent upon the youth's perception of a given situation as abusive (challenged by desensitization and normalization of tech-facilitated abuse), awareness of available support resources (unknown if not surfaced in relevant, visible, and timely channels), and the perceived efficacy of formal and informal support systems (platform providers, family networks, educational systems, and more). At present, our findings suggest that youth tended to turn to others for help only after the tech-facilitated abuse crossed an emotional, psychological, reputational, physical, or financial line where harm has often already been inflicted.

Furthermore, we have identified what normalized behaviors and experiential biases we, as a society, must directly contend with in order to successfully support youth in safely navigating technology today. We emphasize the importance of aligning solutions with youth concerns, recognizing the need for access to ongoing support. We articulated the need for a holistic approach to mitigating tech-facilitated abuse and empowering youth as front-line defenders to recognize, respond to, and reach out for help when appropriate. Simultaneously, we advocated for improving the digital literacy of adult stakeholders—such as family members, educators, care providers, and more—about the types of tech-facilitated abuses encountered by youth today.

Future work should explore how help-seeking and self-reliance develop across different developmental stages. Investigating the developmental trajectory of coping skills—how younger youth,

initially reliant on external help, may transition to greater self-reliance as they mature—can inform tailored interventions. Integrating communal coping and an ecology of care will be essential in designing these support systems. This developmental trajectory perspective is important for designing support systems that evolve with youth’s growing capabilities and confidence, promoting both immediate and long-term coping skills and resilience in dealing with tech-facilitated abuse.

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