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# TOWARDS ASSETS-BASED APPROACHES FOR ADOLESCENT ONLINE SAFETY

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## ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

Our limited knowledge about what teens do online and inability to protect them from harm evokes a sense of fear that makes us prone to “risk discourse.” However, this mindset overshadows the potential benefits of youth engaging online and constrains our ability to design online safety mechanisms that are developmentally appropriate for empowering adolescents to become resilient to risks. Our goal in attending this workshop is to find actionable ways to incorporate new asset-based practices that prioritize teens’ strengths and capacities to improve adolescent online safety.

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## **KEYWORDS**

Adolescent online safety; resilience; asset-based design;

## **INTRODUCTION**

Networked technology is an ever-present force in the lives of nearly all teens; facilitating a wide array of new social interactions but also amplifying online risks. While concerning, these online risks do not indicate an epidemic, nor do they necessitate moral panic; in fact, there is little evidence that online risk presents more harm than the risks teens typically encounter offline [14]. Yet, the fear that teens will certainly fall victim to unthinkable online dangers persists, shaping the technologies designed to keep teens safe online.

Consequently, much of the adolescent online safety research has relied on deficit-based framing [21], where researchers attempt to catalog risk to ameliorate the problem of online safety for youth [2,10]. This type of “risk discourse” often creates a sense of moral panic, overshadowing positive outcomes of youth, such as how youth themselves understand and mediate risks [13]. We suggest a paradigm shift toward empowering teens to be agents of their own online safety by teaching them how to self-regulate their online experiences. In our future work, we are committed to taking more strength-based approaches that focus on positive factors or “assets” that can help improve the lives and online safety of youth by utilizing their own capacities. Thus, attending the assets-based design workshop will provide us with an invaluable opportunity to discuss the challenges and best practices for operationalizing strength-based approaches for adolescent online safety.

## **MOVING FROM DEFICIT FRAMED APPROACHES TO STRENGTH-BASED APPROACHES**

Our research team is currently working on several funded research projects [22–25] related to the topic of adolescent online safety and risks (e.g., sexual solicitations, cyberbullying, exposure to explicit content, etc.). In this section, we will summarize how our proposed research moves beyond traditional approaches relying on deficit-based framing, towards assets-based design that can empower teens to utilize their strengths in the face of online risks.

### **From Abstinence-Only to Resilience based Approaches**

The current paradigm for keeping teens safe online focuses heavily on “abstinence-only” approaches that attempt to shield teens from experiencing any and all online risks [7,15] by restricting and controlling access, instead of teaching teens how to navigate and become resilient to the risks they encounter online [9,17]. Restrictive parenting practices have a suppressive effect on teens, reducing risks, but also opportunities for beneficial online engagement and moral growth [16,18].

As a result, our team shifted away from this detrimental perspective to focus on designing solutions that foster teen resilience and strength building. Our research team is working on several participatory design studies with teens to (a) establish best practices around partnering with teens as primary stakeholders in the design of adolescent online safety interventions, (b) develop teen-

centric and viable solutions that address a broad range of online risk scenarios relevant to youth, and (c) work with teens to understand how we can leverage their existing social ecologies of support (e.g., family, peers, school, and community) as part of these online safety intervention [1,6,22,23]. In the process, we will create long-term partnerships with teens to co-design new online safety interventions made for, by, and with teens.

The strengths of Participatory design (PD) and other resilience-based approaches for adolescent online safety are uniquely aligned with assets-based research. These approaches empower teens to design, build, and evaluate sociotechnical interventions to effectively manage online risks as they transition into adulthood, not just to shield them from online risks.

### **From Parental Control to Teen Self-Regulation**

Parental mediation through authoritarian and privacy invasive parental control apps have been the go-to approach for protecting teens online [3,20]. Yet, these solutions have repeatedly been shown to be ineffective, and even detrimental, to the trust relationship between parents and teens [26]. Additionally, there is little evidence that these technologies actually keep teens safe online, nor teach teens how to effectively manage online risks. Our qualitative analysis of 736 parental control app reviews, confirmed these claims, highlighting that child ratings were significantly lower than those of parents with 76% of the child reviews giving apps a single star [27]. We found that children strongly felt that these apps invade their personal privacy, ultimately impacting negatively their relationships with their parents.

Our team, along with other researchers, has called for more supportive structures that encourage teens' autonomy, learning, and involvement in family online rule-setting of technology in order to promote more teen self-regulation [4,17,26]. The main purpose is to move away from parental controls towards treating online safety more holistically. That is, not only protecting teens from online risks, but also teaching them positive behaviors that support their developmental growth. Therefore, our team has begun to investigate and design more collaborative and teen-centric approaches to improve parent-teen communication and promote teen self-regulation of online risks. For example, we recently developed an android app called "Circle of Trust." Through this app parents and teens can collaboratively manage a teen's mobile online safety [28]. We found that parents who valued their teen's personal privacy and autonomy preferred our app over traditional parental control apps. Also, teens found our app significantly less privacy invasive. Both parents and teens believed that our app would improve their relationship in terms of communication and trust.

Our research team is actively working on designing collaborative assets-based approaches that can allow teens to manage their own safety through self-regulation. Our goal is to empower teens to co-manage their mobile online safety while also building trust with their parents.

## Author Bios

**Karla Badillo-Urquiola** is a Ph.D. candidate and McKnight Doctoral Fellow in Modeling and Simulation at the University of Central Florida. She leverages her interdisciplinary background to investigate online safety and privacy for teens in the foster care system.

**Zainab Agha** is a second year Ph.D. student and ORC Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Central Florida. Her research takes a teen-centric approach to online safety, focusing on parent-teen collaboration in co-designing online safety interventions.

**Mamtaj Akter** is a first year Ph.D. student and ORC Doctoral Fellow in Computer Science at the University of Central Florida. Her research explores how community oversight plays a role on improving individuals' digital privacy and security decisions.

**Pamela J. Wisniewski** is the Director of the STIR Lab and an Associate Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Central Florida. Her work lies at the intersection of Social Computing and Privacy and she is an expert in the interplay between social media, privacy, and online safety for adolescents. She was one of the first researchers to recognize the need for a resilience-based approach, rather than an abstinence-based approach to adolescent online safety, and to back this stance up with empirical data.  
<https://stirlab.org/>

## Empowering At-Risk Youth

By focusing on parental mediation as the primary means for keeping teens safe online, we neglect the fact that the teens who are most vulnerable (e.g., foster youth [5]) to the most serious online risks (e.g., sexual predation and cyberbullying) are often those who lack engaged and supportive parental supervision both on and offline [19]. In addition, restricting access to technology as a means of protection further disadvantages these youth who could benefit from having access [11].

To overcome these challenges, our research leverages the social ecological perspective of adolescent resilience [12]. The social ecological perspective of resilience acknowledges that teens are nested within social systems (e.g., individual, family, peer, school, and community [8]) that contribute to the proximal processes that facilitate their well-being under stressful circumstances [12]. This perspective moves away from the idea that “invulnerable” youth [12] have immutable characteristics (e.g., intelligence) that insulate them from harm, implying that at-risk youth who do not thrive are somehow deficient. Instead, it focuses on strength-based approaches by identifying promotive assets that help reduce the likelihood of risk exposure and protective factors that serve to mitigate harm resulting from risk exposure [21]. For example, cultivating a sense of personal agency and teaching youth effective coping strategies can help them more effectively manage risks, providing a sense of empowerment [12]. A key component of resilience theory is that resilience cannot occur in the absence of risk [21]. Instead, it is in the interaction between the individual and the environment where youth can acquire the necessary resources to overcome adversity to achieve successful outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

My (Karla) goal in attending this workshop is to critically engage with a community of researchers with whom I can further discuss best practices for applying strength-based approaches to the work outlined in this position paper. By attending this workshop, I hope to gain the following:

- A support network of researchers with whom I can share my experiences and build a collaborative relationship.
- Actionable ways to incorporate new asset-based practices that can meaningfully address adolescent online safety research.

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