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Peer Audience Valuation and Accessible Adult Support in Adolescent Online Harm

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ABSTRACT

Why can adolescents recognise online harm and know an available adult yet still avoid seeking assistance? This theoretical article develops an incident-specific account linking peer audience valuation to the use of adult support. A purposive synthesis of social cognitive, ecological, help-seeking, digital parenting and disclosure research distinguishes practical accessibility, provider-specific response credibility and anticipated disclosure costs. Its central argument is that improving a contact route may have different effects depending on the social and informational losses adolescents expect from using it. Valuing an audience increases the relevance of peer sanctions only when that audience is expected to penalise adult involvement; approval of harmful content does not establish this expectation. Six conditional propositions address recognition, visible disagreement, access to help, parenting practices, response experience and material resources. A conceptual figure and three analytical tables connect the propositions to candidate observations and potentially disconfirming tests. The account distinguishes targets, witnesses and contributors, allows movement between providers, and separates first contact from assistance and subsequent harm reduction. A feasibility design illustrates how baseline concerns and expectations could be recorded before a navigation intervention. International application requires locally meaningful measures of loyalty, authority, privacy and access, alongside evaluation of institutional capacity. The contribution is a testable explanation of when available support becomes usable, rather than an assumption that more reporting necessarily means less harm.

Keywords: Adolescent Online Harm; Audience Valuation; Digital Parenting; Help-Seeking; Response Credibility; Social Ecology

INTRODUCTION

A harmful post can acquire social value within a peer group while creating a difficulty that a young person feels unable to discuss with an adult. The same adolescent may know a parent who is available, disagree privately with humiliating content and still anticipate that seeking help will cost friendships or widen exposure. Explaining this combination requires more than identifying peers as a risk and adults as a protective resource. It requires an account of how the expected consequences of peer participation and adult contact become connected.

This theoretical article asks when available adult support becomes usable after peer-related online harm. It distinguishes the practical opportunity to make contact from expectations about the response and the costs of disclosure. Its central claim concerns their interaction: making contact easier may achieve little where the anticipated consequences of using that route remain unacceptable. The six propositions specify when this claim should hold and how it could be challenged. First contact, assistance received and harm reduction remain distinct outcomes.

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The argument builds on established theory rather than treating relational influence as a new discovery. Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model places processes, persons, contexts and time in dynamic relation. Bandura's (2001) social cognitive account explains why observed consequences and anticipated outcomes matter for action. Nesi et al. (2018) examine how social media can transform peer-group processes, while Patel and Quan-Haase (2024) develop a social-ecological account of cyberbullying that gives digital media a substantial role. These perspectives make a narrowly individual explanation insufficient. They also invite a more explicit account of the transition from peer interaction to assistance across family and school relationships.

The contribution is an incident-specific connection between peer appraisal and provider choice. Whose recognition matters is distinct from whether that audience is expected to penalise adult involvement. Response credibility concerns a specified provider, while disclosure costs concern the anticipated consequences of contacting that provider about a particular incident. Separating these judgements makes it possible to test whether access improvements work differently across cost conditions. The account must explain more than the separate associations of peer influence and adult availability, and more than broader trust or exposure opportunities already explain.

The focal domain is peer-related online harm during adolescence, particularly within school or friendship networks. The proposed connection is strongest when a meaningful audience can impose consequences for adult involvement. Recognition and affiliation may matter to targets, witnesses and contributors in different ways; a target’s concern about belonging does not imply approval of the harm. The audience mechanism is more limited when the perpetrator is unknown, coercive control dominates, or adult institutions themselves are implicated. Those configurations require attention to protection and institutional accountability beyond peer approval.

Conceptual Approach

This article uses a purposive conceptual synthesis to explain the transition from a recognised online concern to adult assistance. Sources serve three functions: established theories identify candidate processes; empirical studies constrain their interpretation; and methodological work guides testable distinctions. Selection was based on relevance to this transition rather than a systematic search or an estimate of the frequency of findings across the literature. The synthesis therefore offers a theoretical account with explicit boundaries, rather than a comprehensive evidence review or pooled effect.

Conceptual development proceeded by defining each construct’s actor and timing, separating observations from interpretations, and deriving six propositions with competing explanations. Experimental studies inform immediate responses to manipulated cues; longitudinal studies inform temporal associations; qualitative studies identify meanings and perceived barriers; and cross-sectional studies describe covariation. These forms of evidence support different inferences and are not treated as interchangeable confirmation of the model. No participant quotations, thesis correlations or original empirical tables are reproduced or reanalysed.

Forms of harm and the Boundaries of the Model

Cyberbullying and online harm are not interchangeable. Smith et al. (2008) locate cyberbullying within intentional aggression involving repetition and difficulty defending oneself. Their distinction directs attention to power and persistence rather than to the mere presence of an unpleasant message. Digital repetition also requires care: repeated perpetrator actions, redistribution by others and repeated exposure to one persistent post are related but distinct processes. A single severe incident can warrant assistance even when it does not meet a study’s bullying definition. The present framework therefore specifies the harmful action before applying a bullying label.

Three dimensions determine the relevance of the peer mechanism: the relationship between actors, the organisation of exposure and the distribution of control. Actors may be known peers, intimate partners, unknown users or overlapping audiences. Exposure may occur in a private exchange, a bounded group or material that circulates across settings. Control concerns the ability to leave, prevent redistribution or obtain

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assistance without credible retaliation. These dimensions intersect: a private threat may depend on possible public circulation, while a widely shared image may originate within an initially private relationship.

For repeated humiliation or exclusion within a school-linked group, audience approval may reward contributors while the same group makes objection or reporting costly. The model predicts a connection between peer valuation and adult contact when those sanctions are anticipated. For an isolated hostile exchange, perceived seriousness and expectations of resolution without escalation may be more consequential. Remaining silent can therefore reflect a resolved concern or low perceived need as well as an obstructed route to assistance.

Unwanted circulation of personal or intimate material adds an informational problem. The anticipated cost may concern further exposure, adult blame or loss of control over the audience, rather than approval of the original act. Here, response credibility must include a plausible explanation of information handling and the limits of confidentiality. Asking a target to obtain peer consensus before seeking assistance would misapply the model. Likewise, research should not count consensual communication as abuse merely because its content is sensitive; the relevant acts are coercion, unwanted dissemination and other specified harms.

Threats, extortion, coercive partner conduct and harassment by unknown adults may involve control that cannot be reduced to peer approval. The accessibility and credibility components can still describe barriers to obtaining help, but the audience-reward pathway may be weak or absent. Where a perpetrator can credibly threaten serious consequences, reassurance about a reporting process is insufficient without actual protective capacity. If the usual adult provider is implicated in the harm, an independent route becomes necessary. These boundary conditions locate responsibility in perpetrators, institutions and platforms as well as interpersonal expectations.

Recognising a concern, disclosing information and seeking assistance are separate transitions. Help may also arrive through adult detection without adolescent-initiated contact. An intervention that improves detection can initially increase recorded incidents, so neither more reports nor fewer reports alone establishes harm reduction. Table 1 identifies incident configurations in which the proposed mechanism is likely to differ.

Table 1. Incident configurations and the limits of the relational mechanism

Incident configuration	Most relevant anticipated consequence	Implication for the model
Repeated peer humiliation or exclusion	Loss of standing, affiliation or safety within an ongoing peer group.	Audience valuation can connect expected recognition and disclosure costs when sanctions for adult involvement are anticipated.
Episodic peer aggression	Escalation of conflict or disruption of a relationship.	Assess perceived need and seriousness before interpreting absence of adult contact.
Unwanted circulation of personal material	Further exposure, blame or loss of control over information.	Test provider-specific information handling and redistribution concerns; do not assume peer loyalty is the main barrier.
Coercive or non-peer harm	Retaliation, continuing control or inability to obtain protection.	Access and protective capacity remain relevant; the peer-audience pathway may be weak or absent.

Note. These are analytical configurations, not diagnostic categories or observed findings. An incident may move between configurations as its audience and consequences change.

The analytical unit is an adolescent's decision concerning a specified incident, audience and potential support provider. Group norms and institutional practices require evidence at their corresponding levels. Agreement among respondents about peer approval does not itself establish observed group behaviour; a policy states

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what a school prescribes, rather than what students experience. Adolescent reports, adult accounts, interaction records and institutional documents can therefore provide complementary evidence.

Theoretical Foundations and Explanatory Contribution

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) locate development in processes involving persons, contexts and time. Here, that orientation directs attention to how peer reactions change expectations about contact in family or school settings. This application does not operationalise the full bioecological model. Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory supplies the complementary emphasis on anticipated consequences.

Sherman et al. (2016) experimentally varied displayed endorsement in a simulated social-media task and found differences in adolescents' responses to highly endorsed photographs. This supports attention to approval cues, but does not show that likes cause cyberbullying. The present extension asks whether similar endorsement carries different social value when attributed to a consequential audience. Behavioural reinforcement would additionally require evidence that consequences increase later participation, with prior conduct and audience selection addressed. Expected recognition is the immediate outcome proposed here.

Normative information also requires interpretation. Descriptive norms concern perceived behaviour, whereas injunctive norms concern perceived approval; the distinction is central to Cialdini et al.'s (1990) account. Seeing several people circulate a post does not establish that most viewers approve of it. Work on transformed peer processes and contextual bystander responses supports attention to these distinctions (Machackova, 2020; Nesi et al., 2018). The proposed model further asks whether silence reflects agreement, low audience relevance, uncertainty or the anticipated cost of objection. Those possibilities predict different responses to visible disagreement.

Digital parenting encompasses distinct practices. Modecki et al. (2022) document heterogeneous definitions and measures, while Stattin and Kerr (2000) distinguish adult knowledge from the processes through which it is acquired, including adolescent disclosure. Greater parental knowledge therefore does not establish inspection or accessible assistance. Doty et al. (2025) examine prospective associations involving active and restrictive media parenting; Morales-Álvarez et al. (2025) examine positive parenting, disclosure and defending in a cross-sectional Mexican sample. Together, these studies motivate differentiated pathways and outcomes, while leaving the proposed access–cost interaction untested.

Arató et al. (2022) found differing associations of family functioning, perceived support and emotion regulation with cybervictimisation and perpetration. The proposed model narrows the unit to an adolescent, incident and provider. Similarly, bystander responses include helping, joining in and doing nothing (Van Cleemput et al., 2014); silence or absence of public defending does not establish endorsement.

Bullying-disclosure research brings the transition into sharper focus. Boulton et al. (2017) identified anticipated peer disapproval, weakness and autonomy concerns among English adolescents. Dennehy et al. (2020) documented Irish young people's concerns about parents' capacity to help and school responses to cybervictimisation. These studies establish reasons to examine anticipated consequences beyond route awareness. They do not establish how those consequences modify the effect of an access improvement on subsequent contact.

The broader help-seeking literature already treats assistance as a process involving recognition, expression and willingness to approach a source of help (Rickwood et al., 2005). Gulliver et al. (2010) identify stigma, embarrassment and self-reliance among barriers reported by young people seeking mental-health support. That literature concerns a related domain rather than online harm specifically. It prevents a claim that the existence of disclosure barriers is novel: the present extension specifies how a valued audience, a named adult and a practical route may interact for a particular concern.

Response credibility also depends on institutions. Bell and Fandrem (2026) describe parental concerns about school communication, resources and cooperation in Norway. Devleeschouwer et al. (2026) distinguish class norms and teacher responses in longitudinal primary-school bullying research. Neither study directly tests

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adolescent online help-seeking; both caution against equating adult presence or visible norms with effective assistance.

Peer culture and Networked Audiences

Communication research explains why approval and disclosure cannot be read apart from peer culture. Marwick and boyd (2014a) show how American teenagers' descriptions of conflict as "drama" involve audience participation and distance their accounts from adult bullying categories.

Their networked-privacy analysis locates information control in relationships, because other people can redistribute or reinterpret personal material (Marwick & boyd, 2014b). These studies do not establish the present propositions or represent Ghanaian adolescents. They motivate asking what a reaction means to a particular group and which audience a disclosure may reach.

The resulting sociological question is how recognition is organised. A close friendship group, a school-status crowd and an online interest community may confer different rewards, and their audiences may overlap. Research should elicit locally meaningful groups and terms before asking about endorsement or betrayal. Our inference is that adult contact can alter the audience for a conflict as well as the assistance available. This distinguishes the proposed mechanism from counting likes or assuming a uniform peer norm.

Constructs and their Measurement Boundaries

Audience valuation is the importance attached to recognition or rejection by a specified audience. Classmates, close friends, unknown users and an online interest community can matter differently to the same adolescent. Valuation is distinct from endorsement: a valued group may condemn a post, whereas an irrelevant audience may approve it. Proposition 1 concerns their joint relationship with expected recognition. Follower totals and reaction counts do not directly measure either the importance of the audience or the anticipated reward of a particular act.

Support accessibility is the practical ability to initiate contact with a relevant adult when a concern occurs. It includes knowing an available route and having the time, resources and opportunity to use it within a defined period. Its prospective assessment should concern the route as it exists before the decision. Whether contact was attempted, received a response and led to assistance are subsequent observations. Accessibility does not include willingness to disclose or a favourable judgement about what will happen afterwards. An adolescent can demonstrate how to reach a counsellor yet refuse to do so; this is not a reason to redefine the route as inaccessible.

Response credibility is the expectation that a specified adult or institution will follow an understandable process, explain relevant decisions and attend to continuing harm. It should be measured prospectively in relation to that provider and concern. Credibility is not synonymous with leniency, satisfaction or confidence that the adolescent will obtain a preferred outcome. A response can involve necessary restrictions while remaining understandable; a reassuring promise can appear attractive while being implausible. The model concerns expectations of a workable response, not the moral correctness of every expectation.

Anticipated disclosure costs are expected social, informational or autonomy-related losses associated with contacting a specified adult. They may include peer retaliation, unwanted circulation of information, perceived loss of independence or restrictions on valued activities. These costs differ from practical accessibility and response credibility. A credible school process can coexist with expected friendship losses, while low peer retaliation can coexist with doubts about adult competence. Costs must be measured before contact rather than inferred from silence. The central proposition focuses on peer sanctions and informational costs while allowing other anticipated losses to be recorded separately.

Perceived need and expected benefit must also remain visible. An adolescent may judge that a concern has been resolved, prefer another source of assistance, or expect little useful help despite a predictable procedure. Expected benefit concerns what assistance might achieve; credibility concerns whether the provider can be

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relied on to deliver an understandable response. They may correlate, but should not be combined by definition. The present account focuses on costs that interrupt a potentially useful route and does not infer high costs from every instance of non-contact.

Table 2 distinguishes candidate observations for the model's constructs. These are starting points for measurement development. Adult support refers to assistance and response rather than simply the presence of a supervising person. Family members, school staff and independent providers may offer different routes; their availability and expected responses should be assessed separately.

Table 2. Candidate observations and distinctions for model testing

Construct	Candidate observation	Keep separate from
Audience valuation	Importance of a specified peer group's recognition or rejection, assessed before the focal decision.	Observed reactions, audience size and expected recognition from a particular act.
Support accessibility	Ability to identify and initiate an available contact route within a defined period, assessed before the decision.	Willingness, provider trust, a completed attempt, response receipt and subsequent assistance.
Response credibility	Prior expectation that a named provider will explain decisions and address continuing harm.	General trust, satisfaction after contact and preference for a lenient outcome.
Anticipated disclosure costs	Expected peer retaliation, unwanted exposure or loss of autonomy associated with contacting a named provider.	Actual losses after contact and silence inferred to indicate high costs.
Perceived need	Judgement that assistance is needed for an unresolved, specified concern.	Severity alone, availability of a service or the assumption that every incident requires adult contact.
Expected benefit	Expectation of what assistance from a particular provider could achieve.	Predictability of the procedure, general trust or low anticipated disclosure costs.
Help-seeking outcome	Adolescent-initiated attempt to obtain assistance for the specified concern within a defined period.	Contact intentions, unsolicited disclosure, public defending and subsequent harm reduction.

Note. These are proposed observations, not validated measures. Specify the actor, audience or provider, incident and time frame. No indicator alone establishes a causal relationship.

How Audience Valuation and Adult Contact Become Connected

The account begins with two distinct appraisals of a peer audience. Approval by valued peers may increase the recognition expected from participation. Anticipated penalties for adult involvement may increase disclosure costs. Approval of the harmful act does not establish the second relationship: a group could reward a post yet accept adult assistance after escalation, or condemn the post while discouraging disclosure. Measuring both judgements prevents the model from treating a valued peer audience as inherently hostile to help-seeking.

Practical accessibility supplies an opportunity for contact. The proposed conversion of that opportunity into help-seeking depends on expected consequences, perceived need and benefit. Credible information-handling arrangements may reduce uncertainty about who will learn of a concern, but cannot eliminate peer retaliation

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or substitute for protection. Proposition 3 predicts a smaller response to access improvement when substantial disclosure costs remain, within conditions in which access can improve and contact is not already near its maximum. This is a substantive hypothesis about a blocked transition, not a necessary mathematical consequence of adding costs to a model.

After contact, response experience may revise provider credibility and anticipated costs for a later incident. Peers may also update expectations when information reaches them, depending on whose account they trust. Feedback need not be beneficial: a response may contain circulation while increasing fear of disclosure, or improve confidence without preventing recurrence. Response receipt, assistance, later credibility and subsequent harm therefore require separate observations.

Figure 1 summarises the focal relationships and links them to the six propositions. The account does not assume conscious numerical calculation: expectations may be implicit or difficult to articulate. It also places relational processes within a wider environment of platform design, organisational capacity and unequal resources. Those conditions can shape actual options and consequences, rather than merely adolescents' perceptions of them.

The sequence differs by role. A target may seek protection while anticipating humiliation, retaliation or adult restrictions. A witness may expect a cost from betraying a friendship or identifying a contributor. A contributor may fear accountability for their own conduct, even while wanting to stop escalation or obtain help after becoming a target.

A response that appropriately addresses responsibility can therefore reduce immediate willingness to disclose among contributors while still protecting others. The theory predicts neither universal disclosure nor leniency as a condition of credible support.

Roles should be recorded at the incident level rather than treated as permanent identities. A student can contribute to circulation, later object, and subsequently be threatened. The relevant audience and expected losses can change across these positions. A prospective design should locate expectations before the decision being explained, then record changes in role and information after the response. Otherwise, an apparent contradiction may result from comparing different decisions under one stable label.

The distinctive prediction concerns the conditions under which a contact opportunity is used. Clearer information may help where uncertainty about adult sharing is the main barrier; it may achieve little where peers can retaliate despite a reliable process. Providing a different provider or actual protection could alter the latter situation. These alternatives identify which part of the transition an intervention changes and prevent route awareness from becoming a substitute for effective assistance.

Provider Choice and Contrasting Cases

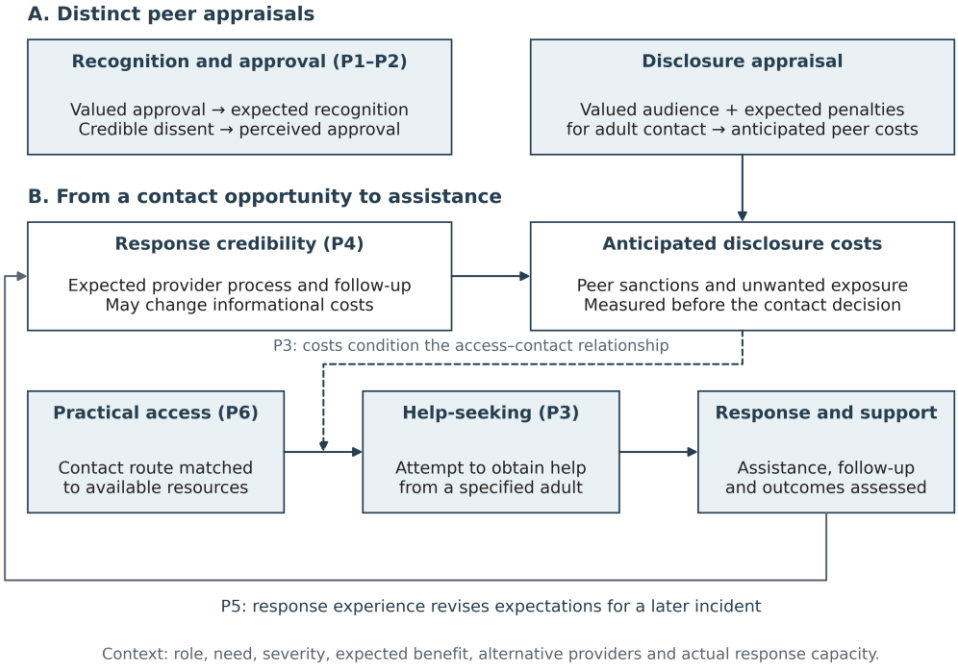
Consider two hypothetical witnesses who value the same group and can reach the same teacher. One expects peers to accept adult assistance once harm becomes serious; the other expects exclusion for identifying contributors.

Audience valuation and route availability are identical, but expected sanctions differ. With comparable concerns and room for contact to increase, the model predicts a weaker response to easier access in the second case. The illustration identifies a testable contrast rather than asserting that every pair of adolescents will behave this way.

The adult route is also a choice among providers. An adolescent might avoid a teacher yet approach a parent, relative or another trusted adult. Lower use of one school channel could therefore coexist with unchanged or greater overall help-seeking. Studies should record which alternatives were available, the sequence of contacts and whether a move reflected preference, a failed response or referral. The model's predictions apply to a specified provider; extending them to any adult contact requires evidence about substitution between routes.

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Figure 1. Proposed relationships between peer audience valuation and the use of adult support



Note. Authors' conceptual synthesis. P1–P6 identify the propositions. Arrows represent proposed relationships, not estimated effects. The dashed arrow identifies moderation of the access–contact relationship; the feedback path concerns a later incident. The credibility-to-cost path concerns the informational component, not removal of peer retaliation. The figure highlights focal paths rather than a complete causal identification model; assistance and harm reduction require separate assessment.

Conditional propositions

Proposition 1 Audience Relevance Conditions the Reward of Endorsement

For comparable content and visible reaction counts, endorsement attributed to a more valued peer audience is expected to produce greater anticipated social recognition than endorsement attributed to a less valued audience. The predicted interaction is between perceived approval and audience valuation. Audience size is an alternative explanation that should be measured or held constant. The immediate outcome is expected recognition; subsequent participation is a further relationship requiring its own test.

A preregistered fictional scenario experiment could vary audience relevance and approval independently, holding reaction counts constant. Manipulation checks must establish their intended interpretation. Precise negligible differences in expected recognition would challenge P1; failed manipulation checks would make the test inconclusive.

Proposition 2 Credible Peer Disagreement Changes Perceived Acceptance

Where private disapproval exceeds visible objection, making disagreement from a valued peer credible and visible is expected to reduce perceived group approval. The outcome is an injunctive norm judgement concerning a defined audience, not an assumption that participants will immediately defend a target. The effect should be stronger when the disagreeing person is relevant to that audience and when the response is understood as sincere. Public and private disagreement should be assessed separately.

Equivalent fictional discussion threads with and without credible peer dissent could test P2. Changed approval judgements without changed defending would support only the interpretive transition. Precise unchanged judgements despite credible dissent and an initial misperception would challenge it.

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Proposition 3 Disclosure Costs Condition the Effect of Accessible Support

Among adolescents with an unresolved concern, comparable perceived need and practical access that can improve, easier access is expected to increase actual help-seeking more when anticipated disclosure costs are lower. This prediction assumes sufficient room for contact to increase in both conditions. Investment in a peer audience should raise peer-related costs only when that audience is also expected to penalise adult involvement. Greater credibility about information handling may reduce informational costs where uncertainty about sharing is a barrier; it is not expected to erase retaliation or replace actual protective capacity.

The primary test should compare changes in contact probability after an access improvement across prespecified cost values, with the provider and observation period fixed. The effect scale matters: interaction on an additive probability scale need not coincide with interaction on an odds-ratio scale (VanderWeele & Knol, 2014). Baseline contact probabilities and possible floor or ceiling effects must therefore be reported. Comparable changes, or a larger improvement under high costs, would challenge the directional prediction within its stated conditions. Separate associations of access and trust would not establish moderation. Uncertainty must distinguish a negligible contrast from an inconclusive estimate.

Proposition 4 Communication and Inspection Have Outcome-Specific Pathways

Supportive discussion is expected to predict help-seeking partly through response credibility, whereas inspection without discussion is not assumed to operate through that pathway. Inspection may nevertheless increase adult knowledge, interrupt opportunities for harm or prompt adult-initiated assistance. The proposition therefore concerns differentiated mechanisms rather than a universal ranking of parenting strategies. It also distinguishes adolescent-initiated help from an adult discovering a problem independently.

Prospective measures should distinguish discussion, inspection, prior contact, general relationship quality, severity and exposure opportunities. P4 would be weakened if discussion added no information about later credibility or contact and inspection operated through the same pathway. Reduced exposure alone would not resolve this help-seeking prediction.

Proposition 5 Response Experiences Revise Subsequent Expectations

Responses that are explained, proportionate to the concern and attentive to continuing consequences are expected to sustain or improve later provider-specific credibility relative to responses involving avoidable uncertainty or unnecessary exposure. Change should depend on what the adolescent previously expected: a reliable response may preserve already high credibility rather than increase it. Conversely, a response worse than expected should lower credibility where the experience is attributed to that provider. The prediction concerns revision of expectations, not a retrospective association between satisfaction and trust. Information about another adolescent's experience requires separate observation of its source, content and reception before a group-level claim is made.

Assess provider expectations before contact, independently describe explanation and follow-up, then reassess credibility. Precise absence of revision associated with response features would weaken P5. Attribution to another provider and already high credibility should be prespecified boundary conditions.

Proposition 6 Access Conditions Interact With the Design of Support Routes

A route requiring a private, continuously connected device is expected to be less practically usable under shared-device or intermittent-connectivity conditions than a route that does not require those resources, other things being equal. This is an interaction between route requirements and access conditions. It does not imply that adolescents with fewer digital resources are inherently more vulnerable or that an offline route is always safer. Privacy, travel, school attendance and availability of staff can constrain offline contact as well.

Zhao et al. (2023) connect parental resources and readiness with digital mediation, while van Deursen and van Dijk (2019) distinguish material access conditions beyond simple internet availability. The present proposition

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extends those considerations to the usability of help routes. A comparison of equivalent contact tasks should measure completion, privacy and time rather than ownership alone. If differing access configurations do not alter usability under adequately assessed route demands, the proposition would be weakened. Any subsequent reduction in harm remains a separate empirical question.

These predictions require separate estimates for targets, witnesses and contributors, and for incident configurations in Table 1. A pooled association could conceal opposite responses to the same intervention. For example, greater clarity about accountability may encourage a witness to contact an adult while deterring a contributor. Likewise, material access conditions documented in Ghanaian research (Kyei-Arthur et al., 2024) motivate testing the usability of contact routes, but do not establish that adolescents with shared devices have higher disclosure costs in every setting.

Table 3 identifies the comparison required for each proposition. P1 and P2 concern immediate interpretation; P3 is the central access-to-contact transition; P4 and P5 concern pathways over time; and P6 concerns practical usability. Evidence for one proposition cannot validate the whole account. A scenario may alter perceived approval without changing real help-seeking, and increased contact may occur without subsequent harm reduction.

Table 3. Contrasts needed to test the conditional propositions

Proposition	Required comparison and outcome	Evidence challenging the proposition
P1 Audience relevance	Compare expected recognition under different audience relevance and approval, with content and reaction counts held constant.	Precise, negligible differences despite effective manipulations; reaction count explains the response.
P2 Peer dissent	Compare perceived group approval with and without credible disagreement from a valued peer.	Approval judgements remain unchanged despite credible dissent and established initial misperception.
P3 Access and cost	Compare probability changes after improved access across baseline cost values, with unresolved concerns and room for contact to increase.	Comparable changes, or larger gains at high costs, within the stated conditions; isolated main effects do not establish P3.
P4 Parenting pathways	Compare discussion and inspection in relation to later credibility, adolescent-initiated contact and adult detection.	Discussion adds no explanatory information; inspection follows the same pathway after addressing competing explanations.
P5 Response experience	Compare later provider credibility with prior expectations and independently described response features.	No meaningful revision associated with response experience despite room for change and adequate precision.
P6 Route demands	Compare contact-task completion, privacy and time under different route demands and access conditions.	Usability does not differ under demonstrably different resource demands and adequately measured access conditions.

Note. These are proposed tests, not findings. Failed manipulations, imprecise estimates and inadequate measures make a test inconclusive. Outcomes after contact require separate evaluation.

DISCUSSION

Added Value and Competing Explanations

The account links established concerns about peer approval, disclosure costs and adult support at the level of a specific incident and provider. Its contribution is a conditional prediction about the conversion of access into contact, together with distinctions needed to test it. Peer valuation alone cannot establish expected sanctions;

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contact alone cannot establish assistance. If broader trust, exposure or service capacity explains the same transitions equally well, additional incident-specific constructs may offer little explanatory value.

An opportunity account offers a simpler alternative. Adolescents who participate in more digital interactions may both encounter more endorsement and report more harm. If well-measured exposure opportunities account for the apparent relational effects, the proposed model adds little. A selection account instead attributes those associations to prior preferences and group membership. Adolescents may choose audiences that already support their conduct. Tests of Proposition 1 can isolate immediate audience information, but longer-term studies must also address how groups form and change.

A general relationship-quality account is equally important. Digital-specific credibility might add little beyond broader trust in parents or teachers. Researchers should compare models with and without the specific constructs and assess whether they improve prediction of the relevant transition in independent observations. Incremental prediction would still not establish causality, but its absence would weaken the practical case for adding the constructs. Measures that merely restate general trust in digital language would not provide a fair test of distinct explanatory value.

Institutional capacity is another competing explanation. Students may accurately anticipate that a school lacks time, trained personnel or effective authority over an incident. Low credibility would then partly reflect real limitations, not simply mistaken beliefs. The model should therefore include observable response capacity where possible. Communication about a process cannot compensate indefinitely for an unavailable service. This boundary also prevents the proposed account from making adolescents' perceptions the sole target of change when the relevant problem is organisational.

Research Agenda and Measurement Priorities

Measurement development should specify respondent, audience or provider, incident and period. Audience valuation concerns whose opinion matters; endorsement concerns the perceived direction of that group's reaction; accessibility concerns a workable route; credibility concerns expected provider actions; and costs concern anticipated losses. Perceived need and expected benefit should be assessed separately. Items must not embed the proposed relationship, such as defining high costs by an unwillingness to contact an adult.

Cognitive interviewing and discriminant-validity assessment should precede a large structural model (Clark & Watson, 2019; Flake & Fried, 2020). Examine item overlap and alternative factor structures. High internal consistency cannot establish that access, trust and cost are distinct.

The second priority is matching design to the proposed time scale. Immediate interpretations of peer feedback may be studied in controlled scenarios, whereas the development of credibility requires repeated observations around meaningful responses. Maxwell and Cole (2007) show why cross-sectional mediation can misrepresent longitudinal processes. Hamaker et al. (2015) further distinguish within-person dynamics from stable between-person differences in panel analysis. Consequently, a finding that generally trusting adolescents report more disclosure cannot establish that improving one adolescent's credibility judgement increases that adolescent's later contact.

Record incident opportunities as well as contact. Low use may reflect few incidents, resolved concerns, alternative providers or unmet need. Recruitment, attrition and missingness also matter because young people most concerned about exposure may avoid incident surveys. For intervention comparisons, define the relevant concerns before allocation where feasible: conditioning only on incidents or needs reported afterwards can change the composition of the groups being compared. Service users alone cannot represent all adolescents with a support need.

A Feasibility Design for testing Proposition 3

An initial study could examine whether a private route-navigation session can improve access to an existing support service without changing its response procedures. Cognitive interviews with adolescents and staff

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would first test the distinctions among accessibility, peer sanctions, informational costs and credibility. Following ethics review and appropriate consent and assent, recruitment would focus on naturally occurring unresolved concerns for which assistance is perceived as relevant and the selected provider has not yet been contacted. Immediate protection and support would take priority over recruitment and allocation. The model supplies no defensible numerical sample size before feasibility and precision requirements are specified.

Eligible adolescents could be allocated to the usual contact information or an additional navigation session demonstrating how to request assistance. Baseline costs, credibility, general trust, access, role, severity and alternative providers would be recorded before allocation. Both groups would retain ordinary and urgent support. A contact task would assess whether navigation improved practical access; it would not count as actual help-seeking about the concern. Credibility and costs would also be reassessed, because navigation could change them. Randomisation would identify the effect of the navigation offer, not automatically an isolated effect of accessibility.

The primary behavioural outcome would be an adolescent-initiated attempt to obtain assistance from the specified provider within a prespecified period, such as seven days. Analysis would retain all allocated adolescents with an eligible baseline concern rather than select only those reporting an incident after allocation. Alternative contacts, response receipt and assistance would be recorded separately. Minimal service records could corroborate contact with separate permission; message content would not be needed for that outcome. The design would not induce peer sanctions or delay assistance for measurement.

Feasibility assessment would establish comprehension, recruitment, retention, contact frequency, contamination between groups and completeness of prospective measurements. Exploratory estimates would compare the navigation offer's effect on contact probability across continuous baseline cost values, accounting for the allocation structure and school context. Effect modification by measured costs would not show that changing those costs causes the difference. Sparse contacts or wide uncertainty would require a larger study rather than count as support for P3. Feasibility estimates would inform simulation-based sample-size planning, while distress, unwanted disclosure and missed support would be monitored as potential adverse consequences.

Cultural Boundaries and family and Peer Obligations

Collectivist and individualist labels cannot determine an adolescent's disclosure costs. Cross-cultural work shows that models of selfhood vary along multiple dimensions rather than a single East–West axis (Vignoles et al., 2016). Family obligation could make disclosure a legitimate way to protect others, or make disclosure outside the family feel disloyal. Autonomy could facilitate private provider choice or make adult assistance seem incompatible with self-reliance. These are competing hypotheses, not findings about particular nations.

The relevant boundary is the locally understood obligation linking an adolescent, an audience and a provider. Studies should assess family involvement, peer loyalty, authority and privacy directly, including variation within Ghanaian and other settings. Overlapping family and peer networks may make contact with one adult consequential for several audiences; a credible independent provider may weaken that connection. Cognitive interviewing should establish how questions are understood, and measurement comparability should be evaluated for the intended cross-group inference (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). Nationality is a setting descriptor, not a substitute measure of these processes.

Implications for prevention and support

International application requires identifying which constraint interrupts assistance in each setting. Where adolescents cannot locate or use a route, navigation and resource demands warrant attention. Where information sharing is unclear, the response process requires explanation. Where retaliation or ineffective follow-up is expected, protective arrangements and actual service capacity require examination. These are different intervention targets. Their relevance depends on observed local conditions, including language, household arrangements and school resources, rather than a presumed national parenting style.

Evaluation should follow the transitions in Figure 1: contact attempts, time to response, assistance received and

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subsequent harm. Retaliation, unwanted exposure and movement to another provider should also be recorded. An apparent improvement in one school channel may merely displace another route; an increase in recorded incidents may reflect better detection. Neither reporting volume nor channel use alone is an adequate measure of prevention success.

Nor should public confrontation become a default expectation for bystanders. Proposition 2 concerns the information carried by credible disagreement; it does not establish that every adolescent can safely object in a group. Private support, adult contact and non-amplification of harmful material may involve different opportunities and risks. Researchers and practitioners should preserve that range when examining how private disapproval becomes action, rather than treating public defending as the only meaningful outcome.

A usable school response should explain who receives a disclosure, how a first response is initiated, which information may have to be shared and how continuing harm is followed up. The practical implication is to examine the whole route under realistic conditions, including language, device sharing and time away from school. Absolute confidentiality should not be promised where protective responsibilities make it impossible. Rather, adolescents need an understandable account of those limits and a route for raising concerns about the response itself.

LIMITATIONS

This purposive synthesis develops a theoretical explanation rather than an empirically validated model or intervention. Its sources differ in populations, settings, designs and outcomes, and the selection process cannot establish comprehensive coverage or a universal effect. The conceptual starting point arose in doctoral work on adolescent online harm, but that dataset is not used as independent confirmation. The feasibility design is a research proposal, not a completed study or approved protocol.

Applicability is strongest where a consequential peer audience and a plausible adult route coexist. Coercive, anonymous, institutional and platform harms may require different explanations. Construct overlap, selection into audiences and services, reporting differences and actual response capacity can also account for apparent support. Future tests should permit simpler models to outperform this account and should evaluate whether its concepts retain meaning across settings.

CONCLUSION

Available adult support becomes usable through incident-specific opportunities, expectations and responses. The central argument is that easier contact may have limited effects when expected disclosure costs remain high, even if the route is known. A valued peer audience can affect those costs when penalties for adult involvement are anticipated; endorsement of harmful content alone does not establish that connection. Credible procedures may reduce uncertainty, while protection and service capacity determine what assistance is possible. Separating these transitions creates a testable agenda for international research and a practical basis for examining where support fails to reach adolescents. Success ultimately concerns assistance and reduced harm, not disclosure alone.

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Competing Interests

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Ethics and Consent

This theoretical article involves no new participant recruitment, participant-level data analysis or reproduction of identifiable case material. No new participant consent was required for the literature-based conceptual analysis. The article does not claim a separate ethics-committee approval or exemption determination.

Data Availability

No original dataset was generated or analysed. The conceptual figure and analytical tables are included in the article, and the published sources are identified in the reference list.

Author Contributions

Serwah Afriyie Danquah contributed contextual interpretation and conceptual development arising from her doctoral research. Kadonsi Kaziya contributed supervision and critical revision. Both authors contributed to the theoretical development of the article.

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OpenAI ChatGPT assisted with conceptual development, literature discovery, substantive drafting and revision, reference checks, preparation of the conceptual figure and tables, and document formatting. This assistance extended beyond proofreading. No participant data or empirical findings were generated. Responsibility for the sources, interpretations and submitted text rests with the human authors.

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