



Children Online:  
Research and Evidence



# THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL EXPERIENCES ON ADOLESCENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH VULNERABILITIES



Sonia Livingstone



Edmund  
Sonuga-Barke



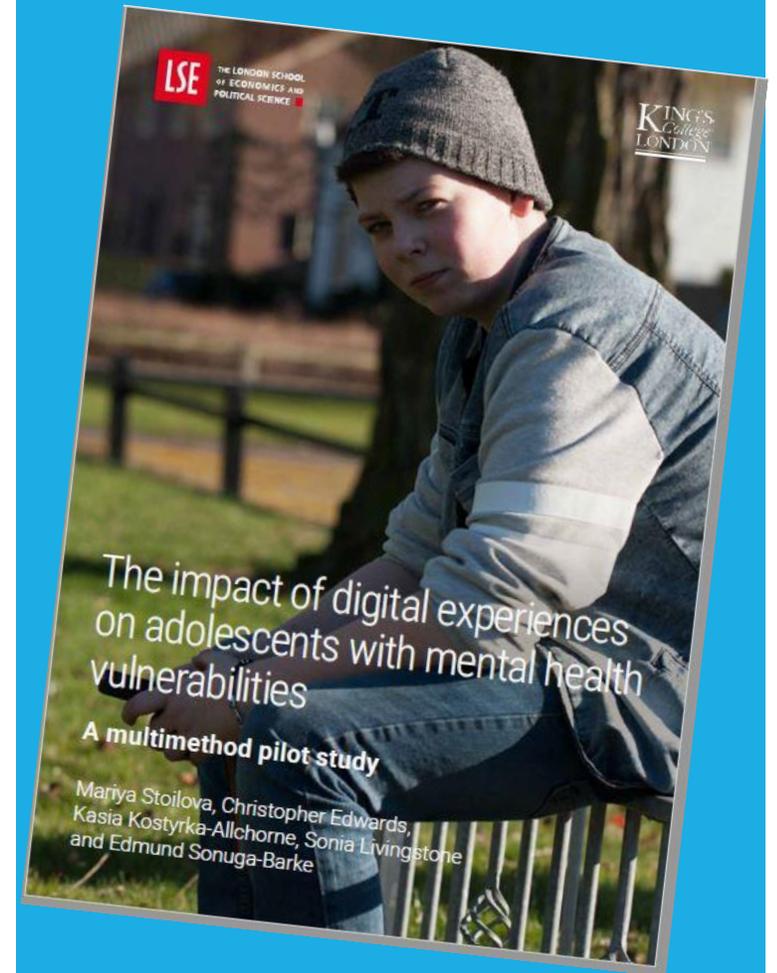
Chris Edwards



Kasia Kostyrka-  
Allchorne



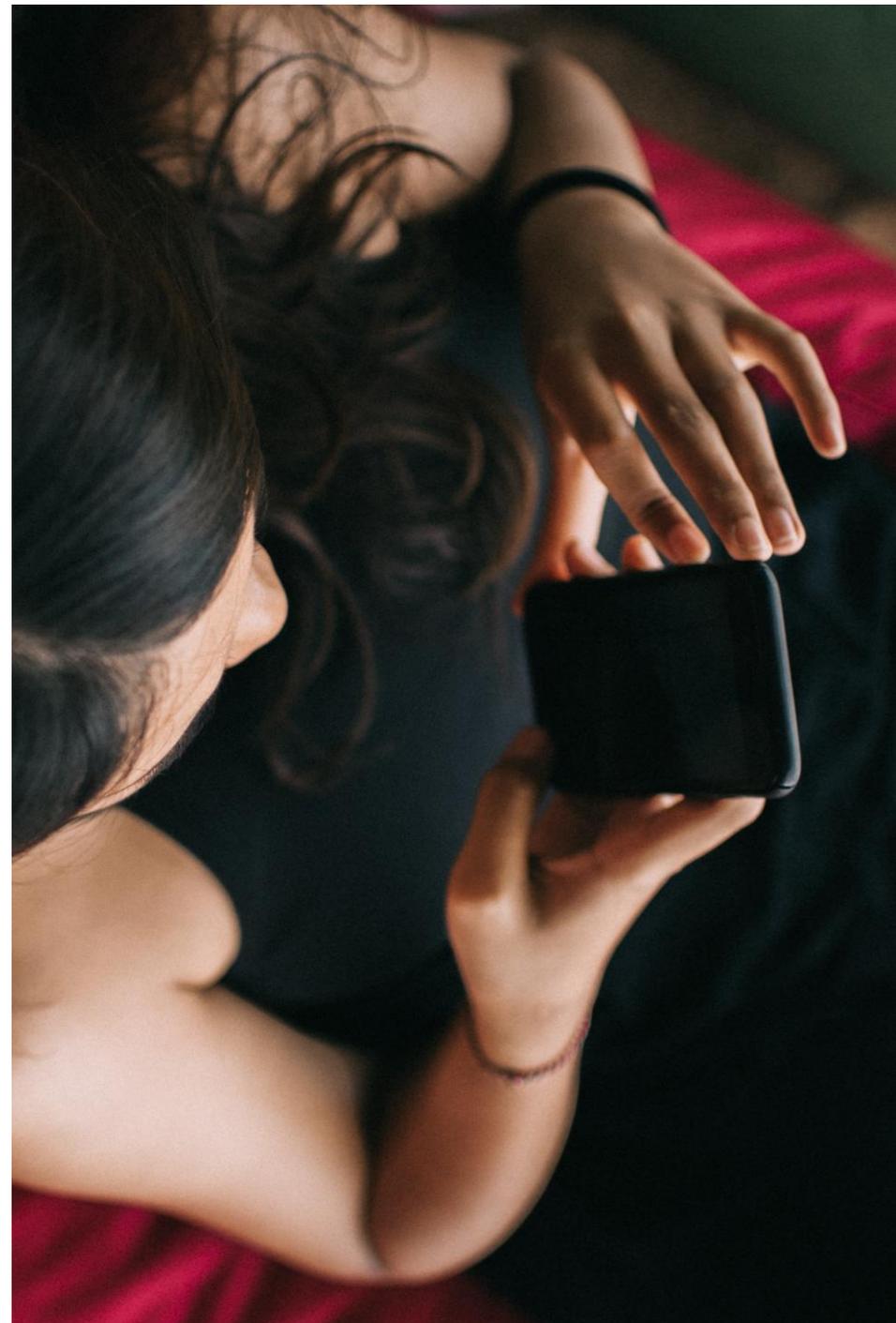
Mariya Stoilova



<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/112931/>

# THE CONTEXT

- An urgent discussion of a mental health crisis among adolescents, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- A link is often made between a rise in rates of mental health problems experienced by adolescents and their increasing use of the internet.
- Lack of evidence and a need to unpack the “black box” of the internet - different types of digital engagement and mental health conditions.
- The need to understand digital engagement and its relationship to mental health in adolescents, including among those already vulnerable because of pre-existing mental health problems.



# THE STUDY

- A pilot stage of a larger project on the *Dynamic Interplay of Online Risk and Resilience in Adolescence (DIORA)*.

## We ask:

- RQ1: Can adolescents' internet use increase the risk of eating disorders, self-harm and overall poor mental health?
- RQ2: Can internet use support adolescents' mental health, whether by placing barriers on the pathway to harm or by introducing online help?
- RQ3: What aspects of "the internet" matter? The research highlights the multidimensional nature of digital engagement, going beyond straightforward ideas of "internet use."



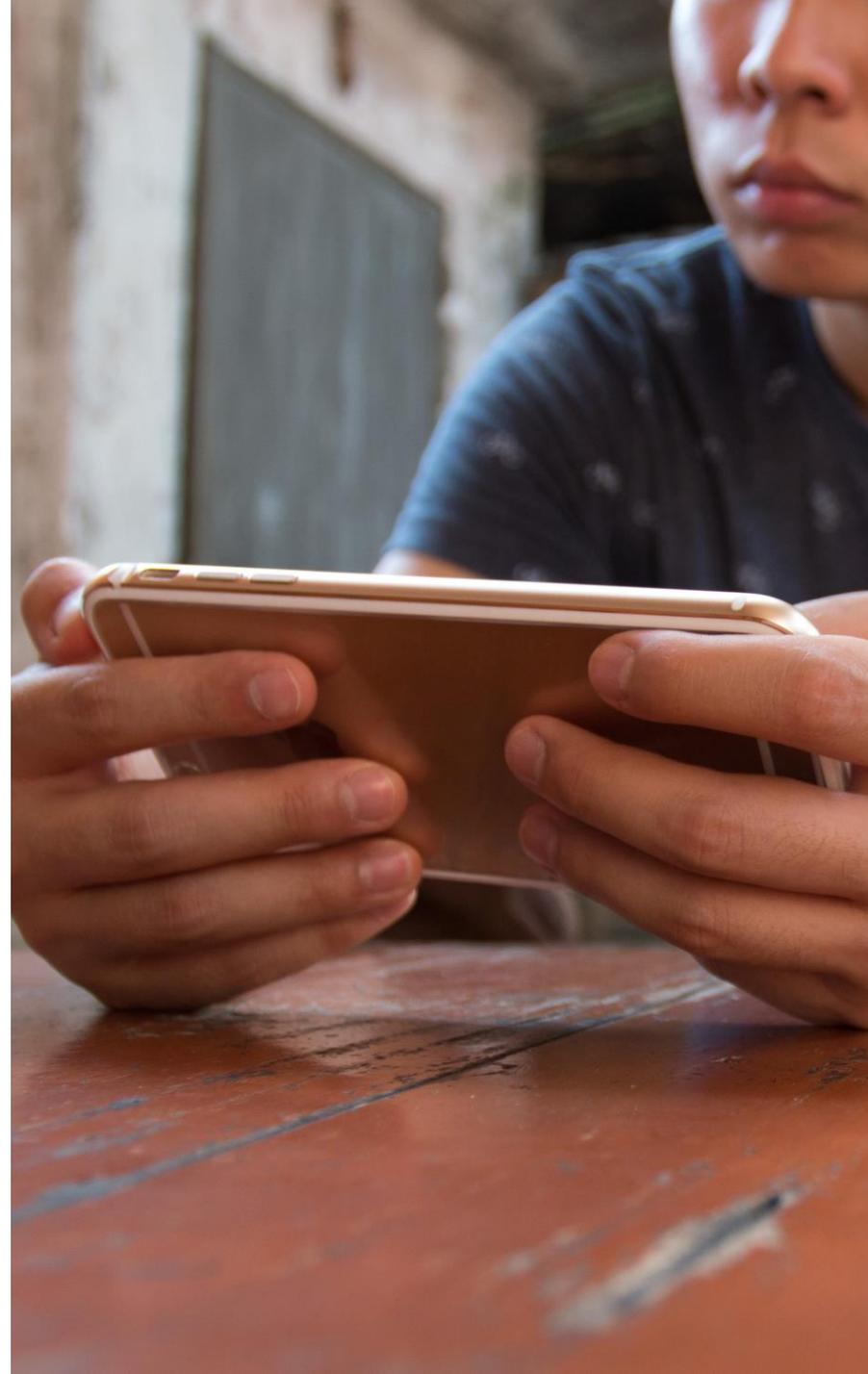
# MIXED METHODS

## **A scoping review of the evidence:**

- Search of 11 databases covering social sciences and humanities, medical science, media, education and child development.
- Peer-reviewed publications since 2010.
- Primary research with adolescents', focusing on their experiences of ADHD\*, self-harm and eating disorders in relation to use of technologies.
- 2,257 publications identified, 113 studies analysed.

## **Empirical research with young people and experts:**

- Focus groups with adolescents and young adults who had experience of either self-harm, an eating disorder or ADHD: three FGs with 17 participants aged 19-24.
- A focus group with clinicians: 4 participants
- Interviews with experts: 15 interviews with senior professionals from civil society including mental health and safeguarding services, as well as those from industry and academia





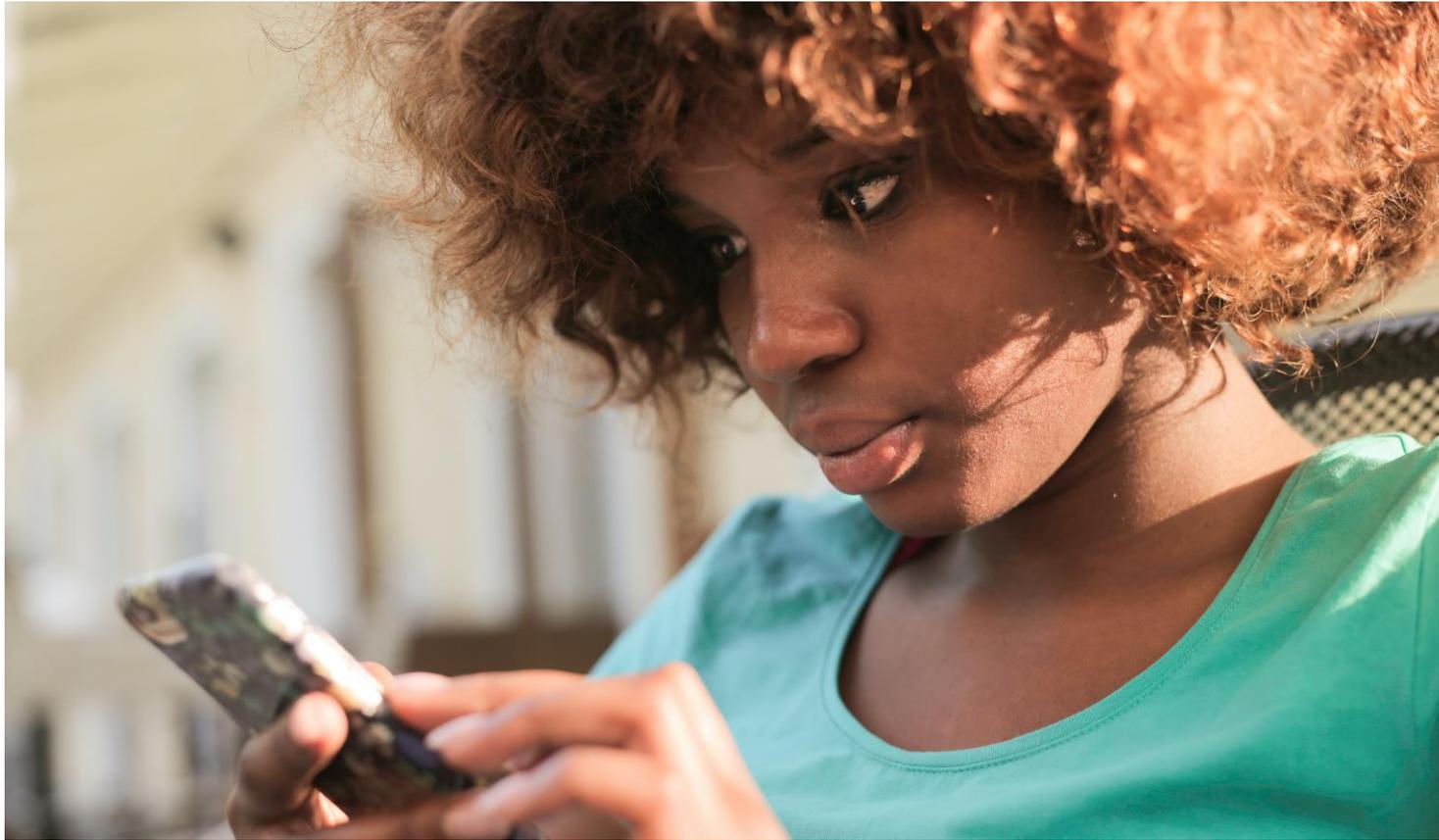
## FINDINGS FROM THE EVIDENCE REVIEW

- Adolescents with mental health problems engage online in some specific ways.
- Considerable similarity between digital engagement among adolescents with self-harm and eating disorders - reasons for participating online and the positive and negative effects on them.
- Adolescents with mental health problems tend to go online for help.
- Adolescents may favour using digital technologies for professional support.
- Online mental health communities can offer a sense of validation and belonging.



## FINDINGS FROM THE EVIDENCE REVIEW

- Online communities can act as a trigger and encouragement for harmful behaviour.
- Excessive internet use is a risk factor for mental health problems.
- Digital affordances can undermine mental health.
- Poor mental health is associated with exposure to other online risks.
- Effects on adolescents with eating disorders are mediated by internalising norms.



## FINDINGS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

**The focus groups took place online and covered:**

- attitudes to adolescents' use of digital technology;
- digital technology in adolescents' response to the COVID-19 lockdown;
- the relationship between digital technology and mental health disorder;
- digital technology use during the COVID-19 lockdown.

“The problems are, like, entire communities online. Where, if you’re, like, not in very good headspace, [it] is easy, it’s, like, gravitate towards, like, mental health communities, some of which can be super supportive. Others can just be super triggering”.

“A big thing for some adolescents is using digital technology to make relationships with people with whom they share interests with, in situations where their current environment lacks people who have those interests”.

## FINDINGS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

### Common themes

- Other online risks create further vulnerability for adolescents.
- Adolescents may learn from their peers’ harmful coping mechanisms.
- Online communities offer a unique connection for adolescents who struggle with their mental health.



“with a lot of people with ADHD, they’ll share things without considering what they are sharing, so kind of, like, we don’t have that filter where it tells you to ‘hang on a minute: is this gonna offend anyone? Is this gonna upset people?’”

“I think [for people with ADHD], it’s actually very important for them to see the people they’re talking to, you, and read their facial expressions and their body language”.

## FINDINGS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

### ADHD

- Digital technology can facilitate organization.
- Feeling vulnerable after posting on social media impulsively.
- Struggles with maintaining focus when unable to see speakers.



“If you are interested in this particular activity, you’ll go online and will look for people who...can relate to you or look for tips on the activity”.

“I also feel that people who do have a history of self-harm, anxiety or depression are more likely to be triggered by things that they see on social media [...] it just kind of impacts people to a different extent”.

## FINDINGS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

### Self-harm

- The dangers of learning new harmful techniques through social media.
- Adolescents can be exposed to ‘triggering’ web content.
- Self-harming in response to online posts that romanticise or attempt to normalise self-harm



“People don’t teach you that it’s not real. [...] I hadn’t known, like, how heavily edited the pictures were”.

“you follow them or see their pictures. You don’t think that ‘oh that’s them in a certain angle in a certain light’; you just compare yourself to them”.

“It can make it can make people develop or have higher expectations or become a perfectionist”.

## FINDINGS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

### Eating disorders

- Highly curated and glamorised online self-representation can be harmful.
- Vulnerability to negative self–other comparisons and perfectionism, both key characteristics of the social media environment.



“When people talk about Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter. I’ve got a grasp of some of those, but I don’t fully understand the purpose of all of them.”

“All of this kind of encouragement of using digital technology and connecting with people... I think that’s maybe what feels quite nerve wracking as a clinician at the moment, is, just that sort of these sort of uncharted waters of, you know, there’s so much going on, so much possibility, and actually; do you really know what are the good things about things? And for who?”

## FINDINGS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

### Clinicians

- Knowledge barriers
- Self-regulation tools
- Some adolescents may prefer online communication with clinicians





# DYNAMIC INTERPLAY OF ONLINE RISK AND RESILIENCE IN ADOLESCENCE



Sonia Livingstone



Mariya Stoilova



Kasia Kostyrka-Allchorne



Edmund Sonuga-Barke

## DIORA

Adolescent Mental Health and  
Development in the Digital World:  
an UKRI research programme.

# BACKGROUND

## Prior research:

- Produced mixed results: adolescent digital engagement (DE) may be a mental health risk but also a source of support, even resilience.
- Tended to adopt a generic and non-developmental approach, as if all individuals are similarly affected.
- Did not allow making causal inferences about responsible processes.

To address this gap, we will examine how intra- or inter- individual variations in DE are related temporally to adolescent mental health.

## Specifically:

- How within-individual changes in usage (type, intensity, duration) relate to fluctuations in mood and mental health?
- How patterns vary as a function of pre-existing risk.



# AIMS

1. To provide a detailed account of the role of digital engagement (DE) during important developmental period.
2. To explore how DE changes relate to mood, daily stressors and mental health fluctuations.
3. To identify how these relations vary as a function of specific DE characteristics.
4. To test whether they are moderated by the presence of pre-existing eating disorders and self-harm.



# THE STUDY

## Participants:

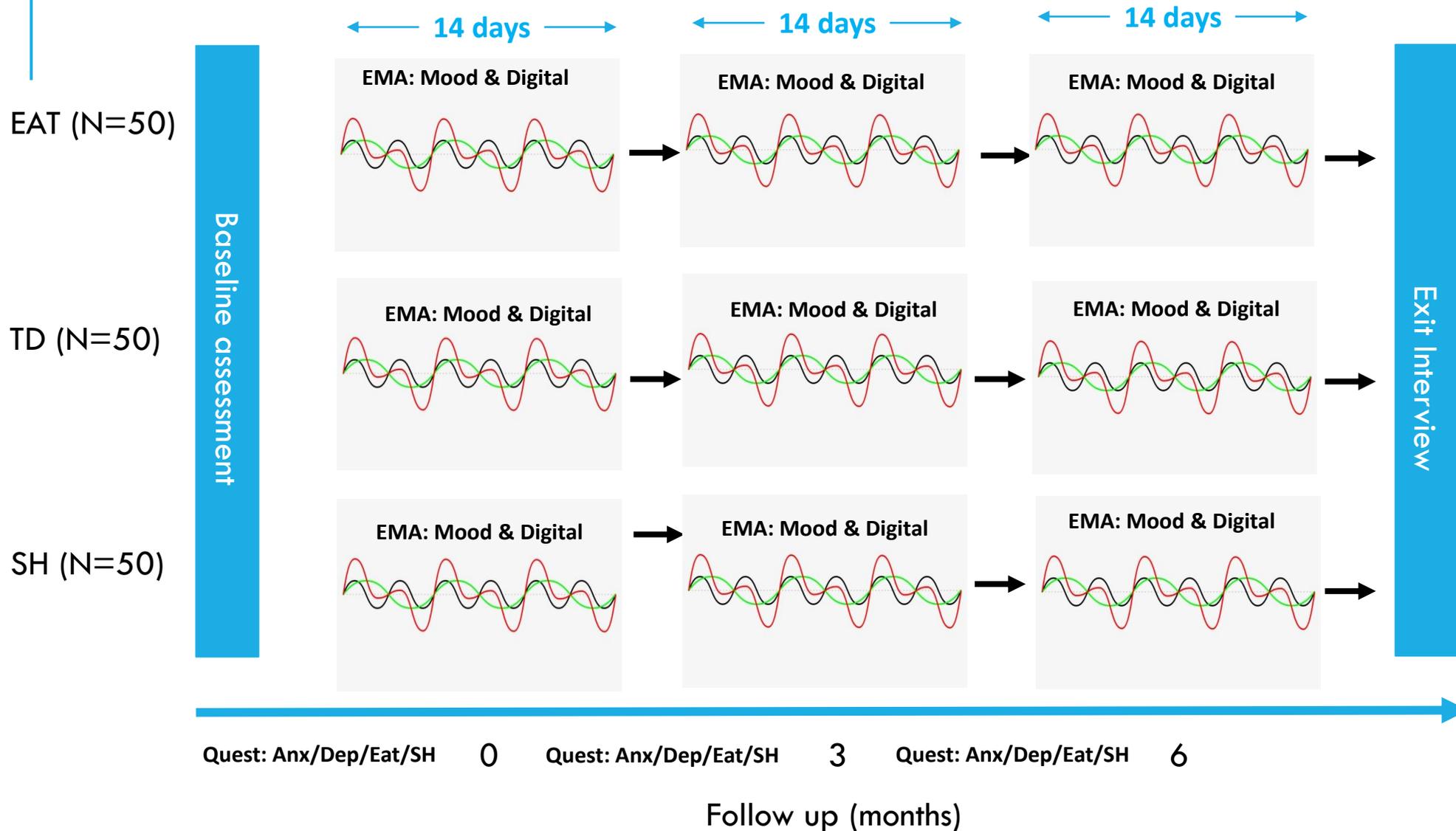
- Adolescents with history of self-harm, eating disorders and typically developing.

## Methods:

- An intensive longitudinal study across a 6-month period.
- Ecological momentary assessments: fluctuations in mood and digital engagement (amount, content, time of use) will be collected digitally over three 2-week periods.
- Supplemented by questionnaires and brief remote/telephone interviews.



# PLANNED DESIGN



**THANK YOU!**



[kasia.kostyrka-allchorne@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:kasia.kostyrka-allchorne@kcl.ac.uk)

[s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk)

[edmund.sonuga-barke@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:edmund.sonuga-barke@kcl.ac.uk)

[christopher.l.edwards@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:christopher.l.edwards@kcl.ac.uk)

[M.Stoilova@lse.ac.uk](mailto:M.Stoilova@lse.ac.uk)