

Business Inquiry and Research

BMSP5007

Assessment 2

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Introduction

This research proposal is focussed on the current proficiency of social skills, in addition to social confidence, among young adults in the UK. This document proposes research into a potentially viable, technology-assisted, self-help response to the chronic shortage of social skills as a symptom of the modern lifestyle lived by many young adults.

Key social skills—according to the Handbook of Social Behaviour and Skills in Children— primarily entail interaction with others, helping individuals to carry out social tasks (Little et al., 2017, pp.523-524). Young people deficient in social skills are particularly at risk of mental health difficulties (Gresham, 1988), especially as social competence forms an important part of overall personal competence—itself comprising adaptive behaviour and social skills. Social anxiety often leads people to suppress their ideas and personality, frequently resulting in these people leaving social situations feeling misunderstood (Rockman, 2017).

The NHS recommends self-help for social anxiety and related improvement of social skills before considering other treatments. Solutions it promotes are breathing techniques, the dissection of difficult situations into smaller, manageable ones, and focussing on what others are saying instead of assuming—in other words, practising mindfulness (NHS, n.d.). SkillsYouNeed recommends stepping outside of one's comfort zone—starting with the least anxiety-inducing activities, working up to those more so—and simply socialising more to acclimatise oneself to social situations. (Rockman, 2017).

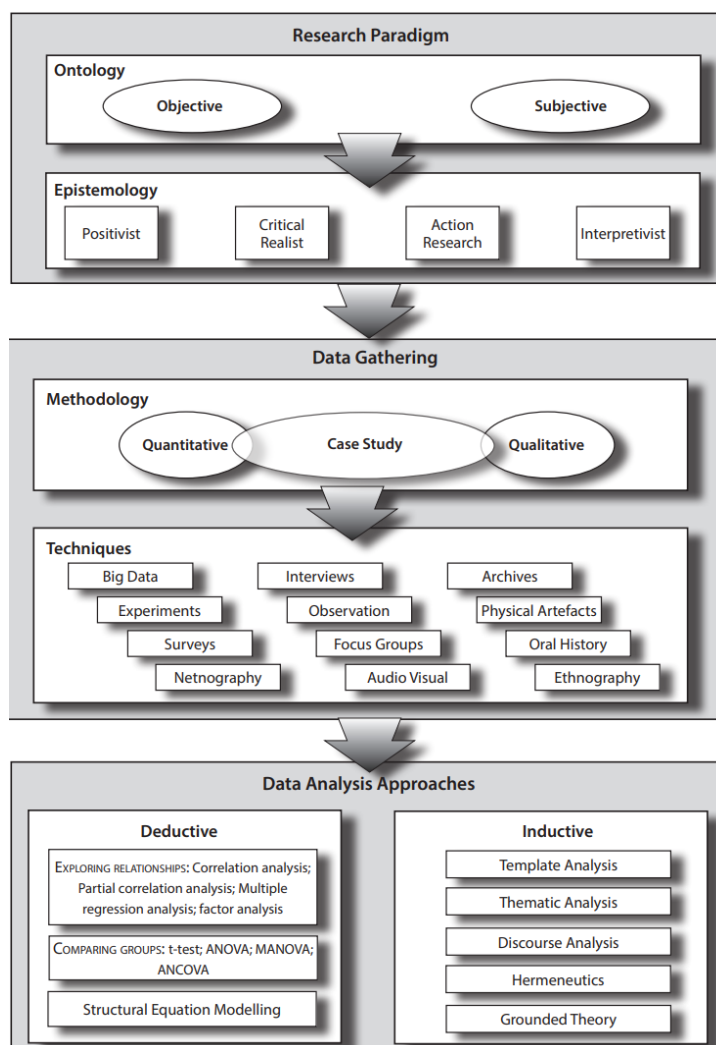
However, the problem for many young people isn't with self-help, but rather with the addictive behaviours hindering this self-help, that the modern lifestyle promotes. Two key issues to be briefly raised are social media and video games. Two studies into the science of social media addiction came to the conclusion that an addictive, dopamine-releasing feedback loop keeps users trapped in a system that claims to give anyone the opportunity to become prominent (Burhan & Moradzadeh, 2020; Maciř et al., 2018). Video game addictions function similarly in that they are a leading cause of behavioural and developmental issues in young people, potentially capable of rewiring the brain's reward circuitry in ways resembling drug dependence (Han et al., 2007; Weinstein, 2010). This feedback loop drains users of their ambition and drive—keeping them stuck in a fantasy where real-life progression comes second—as well as increasing their risk factor for a plethora of mental illnesses. On an international level, this is contributing to an unseen mental health pandemic of enormous proportions.

Thought was next turned to what could be done to remedy this situation. A potentially viable solution—and the subject of this report—is an easy-access application with the progression system of a videogame. This reward system means that such an app would entail the gathering of experience points, through the completion of scaled-difficulty tasks, towards advancement; in this case, such challenges would take on the form of self-help tasks described previously—chiefly activities promoting the state of mindfulness and the action of stepping out of one's comfort zone. Additionally, a social media aspect could be added to such an application to further promote user advancement.

Such applications have already been trialled—Habitica and LifeUp being good examples, each following the above principles with their own takes on certain elements (Habitica, 2015; LifeUp, 2021)—although studies specifically regarding gamification used as a treatment for social skill and mental health improvement are few and far between. This study aims to draw a definitive link between gamification applications and the improvement of social skills (in addition to alleviation of mental health issues of which symptoms include social isolation).

Methodological Approach

Research terms as outlined in O’Gorman and MacIntosh’s *Research Methods* (2015, p.51) will be explained where relevant to this research proposal.



To start, a paradigm has multiple overarching definitions; a “model, pattern, or example”, a group of norms establishing boundaries, (Foster & Ramnath, 1997, p.180) or a worldview underpinning the practices of a certain subject (Oxford English Dictionaries, 2018). Research paradigms encompass ontology—the science of what *is*, seeking to provide a concrete classification of things across all areas of being (Gruber, 2018; Smith, 2012).

This research follows a subjective ontology, which claims one’s experience to be the lone foundation of factual knowledge (Coats, 1983, p.89) as opposed to an objective ontology, which puts forward the claim that the real world is totally independent of cognition and human experiences (Forrest, 2018).

Epistemology, translatable from Greek as “knowledge account” (with variations corresponding to different areas of the field), is the study of what we know, how we’ve come to do so, and how the nature of the criteria for evaluating claims of knowledge should be (Schultz & Meleis, 1988; Step & Neta, 2005). An interpretivist epistemology is used for this research. Interpretivism came about as a critique of the objective point of view associated with positivism, instead being more to do with contextual variables and factors and the finding of meanings from human experiences (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

The methodology to be used for this research is qualitative, meaning that it involves an interpretive approach to subject matter, harnessing a variety of tools for reaching these ends (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sarma, 2015). For this research, a combination of unstructured and semi-structured interviews will be conducted; unstructured

interviews are best at capturing the nuance of the human condition and measuring complex cognitive states, thereby creating qualitative metrics with which to measure any potential improvement through the later use of semi-structured interviews. The data analysis approach to be used will be thematic analysis, a method of analysing qualitative data through searching for recurring themes. It should, however, be noted that this method of qualitative data analysis has some pitfalls; this method is essentially the interpretation of others' concepts and actions through our lens of understanding, and a limitation in the language capability of the researcher can strongly influence the final result seeing as a limitation of language is a limitation of one's world (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p.33; Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

The following process is to be carried out:

1. Questions are chosen to draw out key themes. A mobile application is chosen to be the application of use for this research.
2. A group of approximately 10 participants are chosen using snowball sampling—starting with a small number of initial participants who recommend others join (Parker et al., 2019). This will be done by getting into contact with mental health foundations and groups, who may recommend additional participants for this research. Ensuring ethical compliance, no vulnerable persons or those unable to give informed consent alone will be participants in this research.
3. Interview guides are created for both sets of interviews to aid the lead researcher in extracting the best data from each set.
4. Willing participants are given consent forms to sign, the purpose and requirements of this research are explained and their right to opt out at any stage of this research or otherwise refuse to take part is made clear in order to comply with ethics. Participant agreement forms are then signed.
5. The first—non-structured—interviews commence in a quiet location, free of disturbance. Each interviewee discusses their current state of mental health with the interviewer in addition to whether they feel a social skill gap exists. Finishing this interview, social goals that each participant would like to aim for over the next two months are established.
6. Responses are transcribed for analysis; to ensure GDPR and ethics compliance, no sensitive details are included in transcriptions and these documents are stored in password-protected drives. Names and references to people are removed.
7. Participants download the chosen application on their phones (or any other portable device if phones are unavailable). Participants are then expected to engage with the application on a daily basis over the course of two months.
8. Participants' level of engagement with the application over this period is noted based on a metric such as levels or experience points. This ensures that those who have used the application to a greater extent and those who have used it to a lesser one are understood, so results are not skewed by those with greater or lesser engagement.
9. The second—semi-structured—set of interviews commences. Interviewees discuss how they feel they have performed in terms of meeting their assigned goals over two months in addition to how they feel about the use of said application in general. The end goal of these interviews is to find out whether participants have observed an improvement in their mental health or social skill (or both).
10. Once again, responses are transcribed for analysis, being careful to comply with GDPR and ethics procedures. Participant responses from both interviews, alongside individual engagement with the application, are analysed and final results are produced.

Owing to the qualitative nature of the research carried out, any data analysis and presentation will be performed within qualitative bounds. As mentioned before, thematic analysis will be used for data analysis as human cognition and qualitative mental states are difficult to express in the numerical terms required of quantitative research.

Thematic analysis involves the extraction of themes from interview transcriptions. It entails the creation of a table with three columns: 'codes', 'interpretation' and 'theme'. Codes are snippets of transcriptions, with a clarified meaning, fitting a certain theme; interpretations are the researcher's portrayal of what is meant by a set of codes, and themes themselves are overarching ideas which codes and their interpretations fall under (Guest et al., 2012, pp.9-18; Terry et al., 2017, pp.18-21).

Interpretations then go towards presentation of final data. As part of the presentation of this data, these interpretations are contextualised and linked—potential examples of this being interpretations of the application's effectiveness at helping participants to achieve their assigned goals or alleviate previously presenting symptoms—with an end goal to either prove or disprove the effectiveness of self-help mobile applications for those with social skill gaps or poor mental health.

The timeframe of this research will first be considered. There are to be four key stages through which to progress in order to complete this research to the desired extent. The first stage is preparation, which entails the gathering of literature on this topic to form a comprehensive literature review, the creation of forms in order to comply with set ethics standards, and the production of appropriate questions for interviews. The second stage is the collection of data, comprising the sampling of participants, the arrangement and execution of interviews, and the installation of the application on each participant’s chosen device. Thirdly is the analysis of this data, which encompasses transcriptions of interviews, the analysis of individual application engagement levels and the identification of themes and interpretations from transcriptions. The last stage of this research is a review and reflection, wherein aspects of this research are critically evaluated in order to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology of this research.

Below is a time chart detailing the amount of time to be spent on different processes making up this research. It does not account for factors outside of the control of the researcher—examples of this being interview delays, participants being temporarily unable to install the application or unforeseen circumstances regarding the application.

Stages of research	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May
Literature review												
Creation of ethics forms												
Preparation of interview questions												
Sample group selection												
First interview date selection												
First interviews												
Transcription and analysis												
Participants install, use application												
Second interview date selection												
Second interviews												
Transcription and analysis												
Presentation of all data												
Changes to presentation, layout												
Deadline												

Resources needed for the research proposal will now be considered. First and foremost, permission to use the chosen application for the purposes of the research must be granted from its publisher before any research can commence. If this involves paying for a licence to use it for this purpose—unlikely as it may be—then this is to be paid. A safe, quiet place without disturbance is also needed for interviews with participants so that the environment does not influence results in any way. If this requires the rental of a quiet room, then this is also to be paid before any research can commence. An audio recording device is required for these interviews and an appropriate word processing application is required for transcribing interviews. Access to a password-protected drive for storage of transcriptions and other sensitive research data is also required, as this is a very important element of ethics procedure. Furthermore, all participants need a device on which to engage with the application; those without such devices may be screened out during selection of participants

although thought must be given to those who lose or break their device. An application with a cloud-saving feature is preferable as participants will be able to load their data onto another device in case of loss or breakage. Lastly, forms for participants in addition to an ethics form for this research must be printed and filled in appropriately.

Factors affecting the budget for this research plan are last to be considered. During the initial research phase, any important materials that do not have institutional access will need to be purchased. If a licence is required for use of the chosen application for research uses, this must be purchased. A dictaphone or similar audio recording device is required for interviews, which must be purchased before any interviews can commence. If a room is to be hired, then this is an additional expense.

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