



RESEARCH

ON CURRENT RISKS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AS USERS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS





Title

“Research on current risks among young people as users of social networks”

Text Copyright ©

Authors:

Mila Georgieva
Petya Sabeva
Shadi Mahmud
Valentina Sabeva
Milena Tsanova
Vladimir Kitanovski
Petra Hauser
Karolina Marzec-Balinow

About the authors:

Association "Follow Me", Dobrich, Bulgaria:

- Associate Professor Mila Georgieva, Ph.D., Department of Health Economics and Management, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University of Varna;
- Petya Sabeva – Healthcare manager;
- Shadi Mahmud – Chairman of Association “Follow me”, Bulgaria,
- Valentina Sabeva- Youth worker
- Milena Tsanova - Youth worker;

University “Mother Teresa” in Skopje, North Macedonia:

- Associate Professor Vladimir Kitanovski, Faculty of Technological Sciences, Mother Teresa University, Skopje;

Academy for political education and measures to promote democracy, Austria:

- Petra Hauser, Director;

Association “URBAN FORUM”, Poland:

- Karolina Marzec-Balinow, Director.

Copyright © Publisher:

Follow me Association, Dobrich, Bulgaria, 2024, ISBN 978-619-92834-0-0. (print edition) ISBN 978-619-92834-1-7 (e-book, PDF)

The current “Research on current risks among young people as users of social networks” has been developed under the project "Prevention of youth risky viral trends" with number 2022-1-BG-01-KA220-YOU-000085174, Erasmus+ and as such product it is distributed for free. You can copy, download or print content for your personal use, and you can include excerpts from this book in your own documents, publications, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgement of the authors and publisher as source and copyright owners is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to follow.me.association@gmail.com.

Please, cite this publication as:

Georgieva, M., Sabeva, P., Mahmud, S., Sabeva V., Tsanova, M., Kitanovski, V., Hauser, P., & Marzec-Balinow, K. (2024). *Research on current risks among young people as users of social networks*. "Prevention of youth risky viral trends" project with number 2022-1-BG-01-KA220-YOU-000085174, Erasmus+. Dobrich, Bulgaria: Follow me Association.



CONTENTS

ABOUT THE PROJECT	5
I. INTRODUCTION	8
II. METHODOLOGY	11
1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY	11
2. TASKS	11
3. HYPOTHESES	11
4. METHODS.....	12
5. SCOPE AND TARGET GROUP OF THE STUDY	13
6. EXPECTED RESULTS	14
7. TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION	15
III. RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS - THEORITICAL PERSPECTIVE.....	16
1. NATURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS & INTERNET.....	16
2. WHY IS THE SOCIAL NETWORK & INTERNET ADDICTIVE?	16
3. WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE SOCIAL NETWORKS?.....	17
4. HOW DOES SOCIAL NETWORKS AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE?	19
5. CURRENT TRENDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE	24
6. CLASSIFICATION OF RISKS, RELATED TO SOCIAL NETWORKS	35
7. RISKS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE	43
<i>Group 1: Contact related risks.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Group 2: Conduct related risks.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Group 3: Content related risks</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Group 4: Contract related risks</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Group 5: Cross-cutting risks</i>	<i>72</i>
8. CONCLUSIONS.....	93
IV. RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS – EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE	96
A. PARTNERING COUNTRIES	96
1. BULGARIA.....	97
2. NORTH MACEDONIA	113
3. POLAND.....	121
4. AUSTRIA	126
B. WORLDWIDE.....	131
V. RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS – SURVEY PERSPECTIVE.....	147
1. BULGARIA.....	148
2. NORTH MACEDONIA	154
3. POLAND.....	160
4. AUSTRIA	166
VI. CONCLUSION.....	172
VII. RECOMMENDATIONS	183
VIII. APENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	184



IX. REFERENCES188

LIST OF TABLES:

Table 1. Impact of social media on adults in 2023 29

Table 2. The CO:RE classification of online risk to children 37

Table 3. How often do you use internet?..... 97

Table 4. During the last year, have you seen Internet pages or 99

Table 5. Households with internet access..... 108

Table 6. Individuals regularly using the internet..... 108

Table 7. Devices used by individuals to access the internet 109

Table 8. Individuals using the internet by purposes 109

Table 9. Comparison of online risks for young people, associated with social media, identified in the current study 180

LIST OF FIGURES:

Figure 1. Worldwide digital population 2024..... 25

Figure 2. Number of worldwide social media users 2023, by region..... 26

Figure 3. Social network users in selected countries in 2022 and 2027 27

Figure 4. Global social networks ranked by number of users 2024 28

Figure 5. Average time spent connected to social networks per day in selected countries in 2021 (hh:mm)..... 30

Figure 6. Which social media sites do Americans use most..... 31

Figure 7. U.S. teen girls feeling addicted to using social media 2022, by frequency 32

Figure 8. U.S. adults on harmfulness of social media usage for teens and kids 2023 33

Figure 9. U.S. adults on harmfulness of social media usage for teens and kids 2023, by age 33

Figure 10. Ranking of social media platforms according to impact on youth mental health 34

Figure 11. UK teens on being addicted to social media 2023, by gender 35

Figure 12. Is the following information shown on your Facebook profile? (% of children with a Facebook account, who answered 'yes' 98

Figure 13. How often do you use Internet for certain purposes?..... 114

Figure 14. Share of daily internet users in North Macedonia 2012-2021 115

Figure 15. Share of internet users in North Macedonia that upload self-created content online 2008 - 2019..... 115

Figure 16. What are children doing online? 131

Figure 17. Percentage of 15-24-year-olds who are non-internet users by region, 2017 133

Figure 18. Building a better internet for you 135



ABOUT THE PROJECT

Title of the project: "Prevention of youth risky viral trends", Erasmus+

Duration: 36 months (From 01.11.2022 till 31.10.2025)

Priorities and Topics: Addressing digital transformation through development of digital readiness, resilience, and capacity; Increasing quality, innovation and recognition of youth work; Promoting active citizenship, young people's sense of initiative and youth entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship.

The project aims include:

- Improving the skills, knowledge and competences of young people and of those working with them to prevent the risks associated with the use of social networks (including cyberbullying, tracking dangerous risk trends, etc.)
- Prevention and protection from Internet addiction, dangerous encounters with strangers, theft of personal and financial data, lack of face-to-face contact and interpersonal skills, low media literacy, social isolation, reduced mental well-being etc.;
- Improving the quality of youth work and raising awareness about the risks in social networks.

Products of the project:

- Research of current risks, associated with social networks;
- Study of modern methods of preventing risks in social networks;
- Innovative social media risk prevention methodology (including risks such as cyberbullying, low media literacy, belief of fake news and misinformation and tracking dangerous viral trends that can take lives and cause injuries);
- Handbook for youth workers working in the field of digital safety.

This document is part of the activity "Development of results - study of modern methods to prevent risks in social networks".

Target groups of the project: Youth workers, youth leaders, youth, social workers, and other specialists working directly with young people from different EU countries.

Leading organization: "Follow Me" Association, Dobrich, Bulgaria - a non-governmental organization, registered in 2018. It provides professional and methodical support in various spheres of public life - youth; ecology and



environment; transportation; administrative capacity, human resources (HR), regional development, competitiveness, territorial and international cooperation, education, youth activities, health care, social activities, psychology, etc. The association has participated in various charitable initiatives, environmental and youth causes, conducting trainings on socially significant topics, organized conferences and seminars, studies and analyses, develops projects, programs, strategies and plans, provides consultations and expertise, research and innovation. The total number of members of the Association and the informal group is 63. Partners are municipalities, kindergartens and schools, administrations and business associations in Bulgaria and abroad.

Project partners: Academy for political education and measures to promote democracy, Austria; “Mother Teresa” University in Skopje, North Macedonia; Urban forum association, Poland.

- **Academy for political education and measures to promote democracy, Austria** (Akademie für politische Bildung und demokratiefördernde Maßnahmen, Austria) - a non-profit association dealing with political education, equal opportunities for unemployed and employed people of all ages, migrants, women in the labor market, innovative, digital trainings, digitization, entrepreneurship education, environmental protection and sustainability. It partners with a variety of schools, companies and public institutions, supporting the personal and academic development of children, adults, senior citizens and disadvantaged people. Every year the team develops and implements 10-15 innovative educational projects in which they participate as leading organization or partners, reaching over 10,000 participants.
- **“Mother Teresa” University in Skopje, North Macedonia** (Универзитет Мајка Тереза, Скопје, Северна Македонија) was founded in 2015. Its mission is to create academic opportunities for students where they can develop as individuals and as professionals by combining competence of critical and analytical thought and nurturing entrepreneurial spirit. “Mother Teresa” University in Skopje offers education in natural and social sciences through its five faculties: Faculty of Social Sciences; Faculty of Informatics; Faculty of Technological Sciences; Faculty of Technical Sciences and Faculty of Architecture. The University has been awarded the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education for the Erasmus+ program 2014-2020 for supporting mobility opportunities for learners and staff in educational, training and youth institutions and organizations. It



collaborates with institutions in higher education, governmental and non-governmental agencies, academics in Macedonia and abroad.

- **Urban forum association, Poland** - a non-governmental organization created to support civic initiatives, social innovation, education and implementation of green initiatives. Urban Forum was created by people with international experience and a local ambition to make immediate environment better. The aim is to actively face the challenges of the future - from the digitization of processes and climate change, through the energy and health related activities of citizens, to ecosystem actions and community building. The association designs and implements new solutions, technologies, civic initiatives and models for local community participation in areas of key importance for the modern world of challenges based on European experience. In 2021, the association has 8 experts.



I. INTRODUCTION

Children and youth are an important element of society, and as no small part of it, they contribute to the evolution of the dynamics of any problem or priority. Social networks also play a significant role in the development of young people. Entire generations of students and teenagers experience their world, life and emotions through the filters of their social profile. This is how online social status is born as a term and a way of life, following the pace of collecting likes, friends in the social network, without distinguishing between real and online life. And whole generations remain unprepared for real life, but there are real problems for which students - the future adults, remain unprepared for life.

Information flow is currently extremely fast, dynamic and constantly changing. Every online action is monitored and recorded, thereby turning the user into a product. Algorithm-based models are constantly being built to predict our actions and turn communication into a culture of dependency and manipulation. Under enormous pressure to priorities organizational growth, technology platforms have created and continue to create a race for human attention that unleashes invisible harms on society and especially young people.

As social beings, we all need social connection, approval, and a sense of importance within the group or groups to which we belong. But, if in real life, our group counts less than a hundred direct contacts, in social networks there can be thousands. This project aims to shift the focus of attention to the development of technology and the use of social networks and building awareness that there is a problem that is changing the way young people perceive the world, their values and decisions. In the digital space, young people have illusory comfort and social validation available to them – whether it's deserved or not.

When we feel uncomfortable or lonely, when we are insecure or scared, when we are stressed or need to feel validated, we resort to the places where it is comfortable, cozy and get the attention we want, namely social media. Getting likes is a psychological form of ego feeding and a need for other people's approval and validation. This, to some extent, makes people unable to act according to their own values, but to depend on the values, ego, and approval of others as criteria of rightness. The maturing and developing personality of the teenage inner child fails to create a unique version of their self, being subject to the expectations of the social network profile. This vicious cycle becomes an even more serious form of control over the personality. Unrestricted exposure



to the influence of digital technology can have serious long-term consequences for youth's development, creating permanent changes in brain structure that affect the way children will think, feel and act throughout their lives.

Some of the concerns about the safety of children and young people and their behavior when using the Internet are related to the increase in isolation and increasing loneliness, because in most cases teenagers retreat to a secluded place to be online, undisturbed by the offline world. Additionally, some children and adolescents may have their privacy violated online or be exposed to potentially harmful content that may lead to addiction, anxiety, or aggression - a prerequisite for danger, emotional and social isolation and distancing¹.

Studying current risks among young people in the context of social networks is therefore important and multifaceted. It has several main benefits:

1. **Understanding contemporary challenges:** Investigating and identifying the specific risks that young individuals face in their interactions on social media platforms in today's digital landscape.
2. **Risk assessment and impact:** Assessing the types and severity of risks that directly affect the well-being, mental health, and safety of young users within social networks.
3. **Insight into emerging trends:** Examining the evolving nature of risks, including new challenges that arise due to technological advancements, changing online behaviors, and emerging platforms.
4. **Informing intervention strategies:** Providing insights crucial for the development of effective intervention and prevention strategies aimed at mitigating these risks and promoting safer online environments for young people.
5. **Empowering young users:** Empowering young individuals with knowledge and awareness about potential risks, thereby enabling them to make informed decisions and navigate social networks more safely.
6. **Policy implications:** Informing policymakers, stakeholders, and relevant authorities about the pressing issues, thus influencing the formulation of policies and regulations to protect the youth in the digital sphere.
7. **Contribution to research and knowledge:** Adding to the existing body of knowledge by offering a detailed analysis of contemporary risks among young people in social networks, potentially uncovering patterns and correlations that can aid future research endeavors.



The project "Prevention of youth risky viral trends" (funded by Erasmus+ program) has several important priorities and topics:

- Addressing digital transformation through development of digital readiness, resilience, and capacity;
- Increasing quality, innovation and recognition of youth work;
- Promoting active citizenship, young people's sense of initiative and youth entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship.

All these priorities require to:

1. **Research of risks, associated with social networks** amongst young people in several EU countries (main goal of the document). Knowing more about established risks and risky behavior of young people and addiction to social networks could give the answer what will be the future best practices and methods for prevention.
2. **Identification of methods for prevention of risk**, associated with social networks usage amongst young people;
3. **Developing a methodology for risk prevention** in social networks (created and tested on pilot groups of young people in partner countries);
4. **Creating a handbook for youth workers about digital safety**, including relevant advice, tools and programs on how to apply the methodology;
5. **Organization of relevant trainings:**
 - *International training* of trainers - youth workers;
 - *Youth training* - implemented by youth workers who attended the international training.



II. METHODOLOGY

The need to draw up such a methodology for studying the risks of social networks is dictated by recent results from academic research and expert opinions about the positive and negative effect internet may have on young people's development and health.

A serious work, related to building future initiatives for preventing risks requires a scientific approach. Therefore, a methodology of the research on current risks among young people as users of social networks is a must.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to explore, analyze and systematize current risks among children and young people, associated with social networks usage.

2. TASKS

To achieve the purpose of the study, the following tasks are set:

1. Research the specific characteristics of social networks, including:
 - a. nature of social networks
 - b. influence of social networks
2. Research the risks, associated to social networks, among young people:
 - a. from theoretical perspective worldwide
 - b. from empirical perspective in partnering countries
 - c. from a survey perspective in partnering countries
3. Determine current risks, facing children and young people between 14-29 years old as users of social networks.

3. HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses that are tested during the study include:

- Social networks hide dangerous risks, and they can harm young people of the selected age group by:
 - decreasing skills of live communication;
 - following risky trends;
 - increasing anxiety;
 - addiction;
 - social isolation and other.
- Addiction to virtual space is a reason for building a false personality in social networks.



- There is a need for prevention and knowledge about:
 - protection skills in social networks;
 - identification of risks and risky behaviors of young people.

Data collection and processing will confirm or reject these pre-defined hypotheses about the social activity of young people in the networks, given the specifics of their experience and behavior in the context of the risks that social networks hide.

4. METHODS

The research on current risks among young people in social networks is conducted by using a combination of desk research and a questionnaire-based approaches. Here the specific methods are listed in both categories:

DESK RESEARCH:

- **Literature Review:** An extensive review of existing studies, academic papers, articles, and reports on social network risks among young people. This helps in understanding established risks, identifying gaps in knowledge, and determining the current state of research in the field.
- **Data Collection:** Gathering data from reputable sources, such as official reports, surveys, and databases, to collect statistics and information regarding social media usage patterns, prevalent risks, reported incidents, and trends affecting young users.
- **Analysis of Platforms:** Analyzing different social media platforms to understand their features, privacy settings, security measures, and policies related to young users. This helps in comprehending the platform-specific risks and vulnerabilities.
- **Analyses and synthesis for identifying trends and patterns:** processing the collected data to identify emerging trends, patterns, and correlations in social media usage and associated risks among young individuals

QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED APPROACH:

- **Questionnaire Design:** Developing a structured questionnaire aimed at gathering insights directly from young individuals regarding their social media habits, experiences, awareness of risks, and encounters with online threats. Questions can cover topics such as privacy concerns, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, etc.
- **Sampling:** Defining the target demographic (e.g., age group, specific social media users) and employ appropriate sampling techniques to ensure



representation and convenience sampling based on the research objectives.

- **Distribution and Data Collection:** Distribution of the questionnaire through online platforms, schools, community centers, or other relevant channels. Collecting responses anonymously to encourage candid and honest feedback.
- **Data Analysis:** Collating and analyzing the questionnaire responses using statistical tools and qualitative analysis methods to derive meaningful insights and patterns regarding the perceived risks and experiences of young individuals on social networks.

INTEGRATION:

By combining desk research approach with a questionnaire-based approach and qualitative with quantitative data allows a comprehensive view of the risks young people face on social networks and informing strategies to address these challenges. The specific methods include:

- **Induction, classification, specialization and generalization** related to both theoretical and empirical data, related to the risks, associated with social networks;
- **Triangulation:** Integrating findings from desk research and questionnaire responses to validate and complement each other, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current risks faced by young people on social networks.
- **Report and Recommendations:** Compiling the research findings into a comprehensive report, highlighting key findings, trends, recommendations for mitigating risks, and suggestions for policy interventions or educational initiatives.

5. SCOPE AND TARGET GROUP OF THE STUDY

The target groups of the project are youth workers, youth leaders, social workers and other professionals working directly with young people to prevent risks related to the use of social networks (e.g., cyberbullying, following dangerous trends, addiction, social isolation, fraud, dangerous encounters with strangers, etc.) and the young people themselves, who will directly benefit from the increased competences and skills of the youth workers. Youth workers typically work with young people to facilitate their personal, social, and educational development through non-formal education, care (preventive) or leisure approaches. These specialists also deal with the social inclusion of young people,



including marginalized groups, enabling youth participation and empowerment, education on youth issues, providing guidance, instruction, mentoring and support.

The needs of the target groups were defined based on monitoring tendencies and trends among young people. This revealed the need to help young people deal with the risk of social networks, how they want to achieve them through the implementation of the project, how they can contribute to it through their respective experiences and how they imagine the sustainability of results in the future. Research suggest that there is a need to improve skills, knowledge and competences for the prevention of risks related to the use of social networks, how to apply innovative methods, tools and practices in the field of digital safety; to develop high quality skills to promote social inclusion, active citizenship and good internet interaction; to raise awareness of the risks in social networks and to improve the prevention of dangerous encounters on the Internet, and to improve the quality and image of youth work.

The target groups of the project are:

- young people between the ages of 14 and 29 from partner countries Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Poland and Austria;
- youth workers and other professionals, working with young people;
- trainers and specialists, working directly with young people;
- experts, consultants, pedagogical advisers, psychologists.

The sample of this study of risks include 392 young people from all project partner countries:

- Bulgaria – 276 respondents
- North Macedonia – 31 respondents
- Poland – 41 respondents
- Austria – 44 respondents

Validity is not affected, as a single questionnaire and common methodology were used, and the results are presented by country and summarized correctly.

6. EXPECTED RESULTS

After applying the different methods, results are expected in the form of discovered patterns, attitudes, knowledge and behaviors amongst young people, related to their experience with social networks and more precisely:



- Current attitudes and knowledge of young people about the risks in social networks;
- Ability of young people to recognize risky, fast-spreading virtual trends;
- Knowledge about the negative impact that online risks may have on the lives and well-being of young people;
- Feedback from young people if they have ever been victims of the risks, associated with social networks;
- Feedback from young people about the most dangerous risks they were victim to;
- Information about the influence of social networks on young people and on the decisions they make.

7. TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION

According to Cambridge dictionary² the term **“social networks”** and **“social media”** are defined with the same meaning as: “website and computer program that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet, using a computer, mobile phone or another electronic device”. Therefore, in this document both terms would be used interchangeably to represent all accessible public digital media platforms that allow young people to communicate and share information.



III. RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS - THEORITICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. NATURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS & INTERNET

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory.” This famous quote by social psychologist Kurt Lewin challenges the idea that theories and concepts are less useful than empirical findings. There is a constant cycle between theoretical reflection, empirical observations, testing empirical observations, considering implications for policy and practice, and back to theory again³. A social network is a social structure of individuals connected in network-specific types of relationships such as friendship, ideas, views, traditions, financial relationships, and others. Social networking sites allow us to create a personal profile followed by contacts, discussions and information sharing with friends, family, colleagues. Such are the famous social networks Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, etc.⁴

The social networking phenomenon is less than twenty years old. MySpace was the first large-scale social network to reach one million users in 2004. It connected people and allowed them to share photos. In 2019, Facebook reached 2.4 billion users, while YouTube had over one billion. These social media giants create a fake world that appeals to users. Facebook is preparing its own news service, and TikTok, with its short video format, is particularly popular among young people and gains an average of 20 million users per month⁵.

Potential risks when using social networks are mainly related to cyberbullying, leakage of personal or financial data, low media literacy (ability to distinguish misinformation/fake news from credible sources); and dangerous trends that can endanger life and cause injury. Also, using social networks we become more visible, hence the risk of sharing things from our lives with people that we would not want to in real life⁶.

2. WHY IS THE SOCIAL NETWORK & INTERNET ADDICTIVE?

In the network, young people discover new worlds, relax from everyday problems and stress, succumb to various influences and currents, and some of them even become subject to their interests, while others create an image of a new, fictional personality in social networks – the so-called cyber identity. The process of formation and development of dependence on social networks is manifested both on a psychological and biochemical level. The reasons for its emergence are many, but they are rooted in the possibility in the network to



satisfy unrealized needs, such as communication, recognition, achievements, love, and others. Social media is recognized as a place to experience and hide issues such as low self-esteem, failures, rejection, loneliness and phobias. Unfavorable family atmosphere, excessive pursuit of material goals and improper upbringing are among the leading factors predisposing to Internet addiction. Lack of control, disinterest, complacency and impunity are extremes that contribute to addiction among the younger generation⁷. For young people, social networks are online platforms whose main purpose is to build and reflect social relationships between people. They themselves are divided into several types: for sharing contacts, personal information, preferences or for sharing author's content - music, photos, news, videos, article hyperlinks. We can look for the motivation and reasons for participating in them in the divergence of the real and the virtual world - traditional norms and standards of behavior are almost non-existent. Cyberspace is a world without restrictions, where everyone can exercise their freedom of expression, share their opinion and above all communicate and share in real time, keep in touch with the people of the reference groups (friends, relatives, colleagues). Social networks open new opportunities - to find information, new acquaintances, job offers, discuss and share ideas, find like-minded people and seek their approval, ratings, opinions and recommendations. Online communication helps to overcome some psychological barriers. Questions arise such as: Why do youths get influenced by how many likes they will get from their post? Why do they seek approval or positive feedback in the form of comments and likes? How and when do these so-called likes become social currency? The answers to these questions are not unequivocal. Although social networks offer ample opportunities for interpersonal communication and self-expression, they carry their own risk. In search of feedback, social comparisons often lead to depression and depressed states - the negative side of social networks, but on the other hand, provide an opportunity for development and improvement by increasing the social circle and strengthening the identity⁸.

3. WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE SOCIAL NETWORKS?⁹

They keep in constant contact

The feeling of being constantly connected and able to constantly communicate is the main driver of why young people is on social media. The frequency of social media communication plays a key role in building friendships and forming friendship groups.



They can continue the conversation from online to offline

Young people's desire to stay connected has shaped how they choose to communicate. For them, communication is continuous, with online communication seamlessly transitioning from face-to-face and vice versa – there is no real barrier or distinction between online and offline. Social networks are now so integrated into their daily lives that they are no longer distinguished from other forms of interaction.

They follow the trends

New content is constantly being generated and shared on social networks, and many young people find real pleasure in following trends that are related to their interests. This need to constantly follow the latest trends can create social pressure for youth to miss out on the Trends factor - this in turn causes the opposite effect of exclusion from established groups. Since social networks constantly create new trends that are considered current and socially relevant, young people who are far from it are automatically excluded.

Anonymous monitoring

The public display of people's lives through social networks has created a dynamic not only with those who actively post content, but also with the general audience that consumes it. The audience is not required to react in a way that would be appropriate and expected. There is a growing insensitivity to real-life events as social media users are overwhelmed with updates from relationship break-ups to political views, to deeply personal sharing interspersed with extremely superficial comments, requests for advice, bursts of humor, funny memes and news articles about unfolding current events.

Affirmation and identity

Linking their identity to their social media activity keeps young people engaged across platforms, especially during their formative years when the hunger for social acceptance is a major driving force in their lives. The developmental tasks of adolescence include the process of finding acceptance, belonging, and identity, but young people are moving through this life stage at a time of unprecedented complexity and seeking feedback and validation from those around them. The increased exposure of one's personal life on social media, along with the pressure to present a certain online image during these formative years, creates a challenging context.



4. HOW DOES SOCIAL NETWORKS AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE?

Social media is a term for internet sites and apps that you can use to share content you've created. Social media also lets you respond to content that others post. That can include pictures, text, reactions or comments on posts by others, and links to information¹⁰.

The effect of social networking on teenage mental health

According to a report published by Common Sense Media on the impact of social networks on teenagers, about half of the 1,500 young people surveyed said that social networks are very important for them to get support and advice, to feel less alone and to express themselves creatively as well as to keep in touch with friends and family members. And 43% said using social networks made them feel better when they were depressed, stressed or anxious. Among LGBTQ youth, 52% say social media helps them feel better when they experience these difficult emotions¹¹.

The use of networks among youth and teenagers has grown faster since the start of the pandemic than in the four years before the pandemic. From 2015 to 2019, the use of networks for teenagers grew by only 3%, and for teenagers by 11%. But from 2019 to 2021 alone, media use has grown by 17% for youth and teens. The types of media activities included in the survey are:

- Watching television, whether via broadcast, cable, or subscription service;
- Watching online videos such as on YouTube;
- Use of social networks;
- Playing video or computer games;
- Playing mobile video games, such as on a smartphone or tablet;
- Reading, including e-books, online reading and print reading;
- Using digital devices to create content, such as art, music or creative writing;
- Listening to podcasts;
- Use of virtual reality;

On average, 8- to 12-year-olds use about five and a half hours of screen media per day (5:33h), while 13- to 18-year-olds use about eight and a half hours of screen media (8:39h). Between 2019 and 2021, the total amount of screen media used each day increased from 4:44 a.m. to 5:33 a.m. among teens and from 7:22 a.m. to 8:39 a.m. among teens. This is a much faster increase in just two years than was seen in the previous four years. From 2015 to 2019, total screen use



among teens increased by an average of just eight minutes per day, compared to 49 minutes in the past two years. Among teens, screen time increased by 42 minutes per day from 2015 to 2019. The biggest increases were in time spent watching online videos (up to 23 minutes per day among teens), using social networks (up to 17 minutes per day among teens) and browsing websites (up to 14 minutes per day among teens)¹²

On the other hand, the report also shows a strong link between social media and teenagers feeling depressed. Teens with moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms are almost twice as likely to use social media almost constantly: One-third of teens with depression reported using social media regularly, compared to 18 percent of teens with no depressive symptoms. Also, the more severe their symptoms were, the more anxious, lonely, and depressed they felt after using social media. Apparently, social media doesn't help teenagers who already feel depressed, and seems to contribute to their negative outlook¹³.

One advantage of digital technology is that it enables young people to become content producers rather than mere consumers. Using social networks for creative expression is very important to many teenagers and that some use their digital devices to create content such as taking pictures, creating graphic arts, making videos, using art-based apps, making beats, composing music, recording songs or writing lyrics, poetry, articles or stories¹⁴.

A modest trend toward social networking use at an earlier age is discovered; this is particularly interesting given the impact of social networks on the well-being of young people and Facebook's plan to create an Instagram platform for children. The other new media product pushed by Facebook is immersive media accessible through virtual reality¹⁵.

Additional psychological effects of social networking on youth

Teenagers publicize their experiences on social networks and about their mood and well-being. The effect of social networks on youth is driven by three main factors:

- **Not enough sleep** – teenagers stay up late to keep scrolling through their social media feeds;
- **Exposure to cyberbullying** – posting harmful, false or personal content about them on social media;
- **Lack of physical activity** – scrolling through social media on their phones or other devices means teenagers are sitting for longer periods of time



and have less time for exercise. As a result, they miss the beneficial effects of exercise on mental health.

Teenagers have lower self-esteem when they look at peers on social media. For example, this includes viewing profiles where peers post curated images about their significant others, social events, or accomplishments.

The negative psychological effects of social networking on the teenager's self-perception

Self-perception and self-evaluation of appearance is one major area in which teenage social comparison leads to negative emotions for both sexes. When teenagers compare themselves to curated and filtered photos of their peers and celebrities, they often feel inferior. This can lead to lower self-esteem and negative body image. In addition, Facebook use is also associated with a higher risk of eating disorders. According to a study by Common Sense Media¹⁶:

- 35% of teenagers on social networks worry about being tagged in photos, where they feel unattractive;
- 27% are stressed about how they look when posting photos;
- 22% feel bad when no one comments or "likes" their photos.

Effects of social networking on teenagers as a health hazard

Along with providing ways to seek help and support, social networks also provide forums where teens can encourage each other in unhealthy and dangerous behaviors. Therefore, teenagers with eating disorders or those who self-harm can reach out to others to talk about their self-destructive practices. In these online forums, compulsive calorie counting, fasting, or excessive exercise are accepted and encouraged. As a result, teens may learn ways to hide or reinforce behaviors that put them at greater risk.

On the other hand, a social network for teenagers can inspire teenagers to develop healthy habits. Thus, seeing peers eating nutritious food, doing something creative, or getting outside in nature can encourage other teens to do the same. Social media can create peer motivation, inspiring young people to try something new, follow their dreams and talk about things that matter to them. Teens can also find positive role models online.

The effect of social networks on adolescent identity formation

The impact of social networks on youth extends to an important part of adolescent development: the formation of their identity. Social networks guide



teenagers to practice skills related to identity development. These include self-presentation and self-disclosure - sharing their opinions, beliefs and preferences.

Teenagers who express their opinions on social networks experience increased well-being. Adolescents who communicate more online have greater "self-concept clarity" – a clearer idea of who they are. This self-awareness supports mental health. Social media gives teens the autonomy to explore and experiment with their identities in their own space, where they have control over what, how, and with whom they share information.

The "friendship" effect of social networks on teenagers

Friendship and social skills are additional areas where the impact of social networking on youth can be both positive and negative. Social media makes them feel more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives. In addition, these platforms make them feel as if they have people who will support them in difficult times.

During the pandemic, social networks became one of the most common, and sometimes the only ways teenagers communicated with peers. But there is a difference between teenagers' social media friends and their real friends. Also, the more time teens spend connected and online, the more cyberbullying increases. A 2020 report by the organization "Light" found a 70% increase in hate speech among children and teenagers in social media channels and popular chat forums¹⁷. More time on social networks provides enhanced access to both beneficial and harmful aspects, further enhancing the impact of social networks on teenagers.

The effect of the addictive quality of social networks for teenagers

Excessive use of social networks by teenagers creates a pattern of stimulation like the pattern created by other addictive behaviors and substances. Therefore, the brain responds to social networks in the same way that it responds to other "rewards" - by releasing dopamine. These dopamine rushes are catalyzed when a teenager posts something online and is met with likes, shares and positive comments from their peers.

Social media use targets our limbic system through its susceptibility to intermittent, variable rewards – the same basic idea behind slot machine design – that keep us "addicted" and wanting more. Our brains keep looking for the dopamine hit that comes with the next post we see or the next reaction to something we've posted. These behaviors can prepare the brain for other future unhealthy addictions¹⁸.



Impact of social networks on education

Social media allows young people to share. With the use of social networking, students can easily communicate or share information quickly with each other through various social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram. Social networks shorten distances and change the sense of distance between people.

Positive effect of social networks on education:

- **Communication** - an important part of growing up is socializing and building friendships because it allows young people to exchange ideas and learn new things. This will invariably lead to them becoming more confident in life.
- **Knowledge sharing** - social networks provide an easy and effective way for youth to share knowledge. They can simply access the information, study it, transform it and share it. Therefore, the flow of knowledge becomes smooth and spreads quickly.
- **Self-improvement** - with social networks, the youth will have the capacity to explore new things. This makes them refresh their own abilities and learn new skills.
- **Learning from a variety of sources** - the Internet and social networks allow access to unlimited information.
- **Sharing what they feel or think** - young people often do not find the right stage to share their feelings. Through social networks, they are given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feel heard.

Negative effect of social networks on education:

- **Reduced learning and research abilities** - young people rely more on the information that is easily available on social networks and on the Internet. This reduces their ability to learn, explore and develop critical thinking.
- **A reduction in real human contact** - The more time students spend communicating online, the less time they will spend interacting face-to-face with others. This reduces their relational abilities. They will not have the capacity to convey and mingle adequately face to face with others.
- **Reduces language and creative writing skills** - young people often use slang words or abbreviated types of words in interpersonal communication in the social network. They rely on the automatic spell checker to correct grammar mistakes and check spelling. This reduces their language capacity and writing abilities.



- **They waste valuable time** - young people who often use social networks, outside of their useful function, do not use the available time for academic preparation and this reflects on their school achievements.
- **Loss of motivation** - the motivation level of young people decreases due to the use of this type of communication. They depend on the virtual state, as opposed to the needs to learn and develop in the present reality.

5. CURRENT TRENDS IN SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

The increase in the use of social networks corresponds to an increase in the average time people spend online. Young people are at the heart of this trend. The time young people spend online is between two hours to three and a half hours each day. This matters because it means young people are increasingly living their lives online. This means they connect with friends or family, or find information online, but they are also bullied or spread rumors, and given unrealistic views of others' lives. As a result, young people see both **negative and positive attitudes** towards social networks. Constantly seeking recognition and attention can have a detrimental effect on our lives and make us hurt or need more attention. Frequent use of social networks increases the likelihood that people will feel anxious, depressed, or lonely¹⁹. Like any form of technology, social networks have both advantages and disadvantages. And when it comes to the impact of social media on teenagers, there are significant pros and cons to consider.

On the plus side, platforms like TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat can be lifesavers for teens who feel isolated or marginalized, especially LGBTQ teens (LGBTQ means lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning teens). In addition, social media has helped teenagers feel more connected and less lonely during the pandemic.

But the impact of social media on young people can also be **significantly harmful** to mental health. Social networks and teenage depression are closely linked. Additionally, excessive app use exposes teens to cyberbullying, body image issues, and technology addiction, and leads to less time spent doing healthy activities in the real world. And while most parents believe they know what their child posts on social media, 70% of them hide their online behavior from their parents. Exposure to unlimited levels of digital technology can have serious long-term consequences for children's development, creating permanent changes in brain structure that affect how children will think, feel, and act throughout their



lives. Children who have been cyberbullied are three times more likely to engage in antisocial behavior than their peers. The experience of being bullied online is significantly more distressing than "traditional bullying," potentially due to the victim's awareness that it is happening in front of a much larger public audience. Preschool children who use screen-based media for more than 1 hour each day have been shown to have significantly less development in key areas of the brain involved in language and literacy. The more time a child spends in front of screens, the lower their language skills and less structural integrity in key areas of the brain responsible for language. These structural neurobiological effects of screen-based media raise serious questions about how screen use can affect young children's basic brain development. Media multitasking was significantly associated with later levels of attention difficulties. The extent to which 11-13-year-olds multitask is a significant predictor of later attention problems, highlighting the potential impact of a distracting digital environment on young people's development²⁰. Excessive use of social networks influences both mental and physical health. Young people do not eat on time and do not rest properly. Addiction to social networks has many adverse effects on the physical and psychological health of young people, making them unmotivated to have face-to-face contact with peers and the social isolation leads to sociological and physiological changes. Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of January 2024 is presented on the figure below:

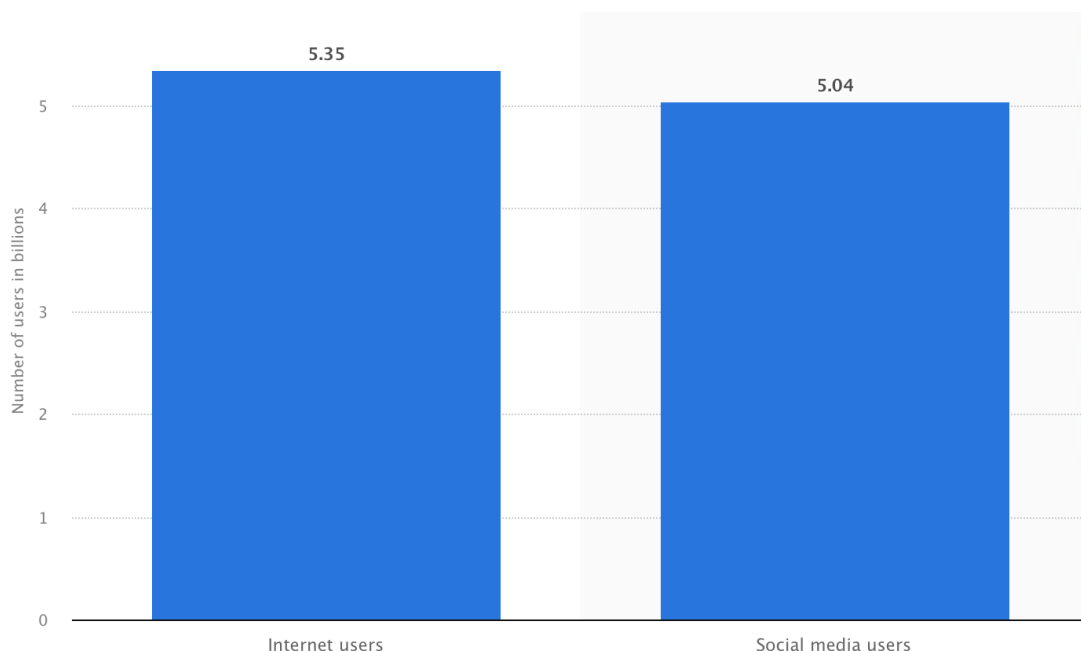


Figure 1. Worldwide digital population 2024²¹



As of January 2023, Eastern Asia accounted for over 1.2 billion social media users, whilst Southern Asia had over 961 million social media users. Overall, around 819 million people were using online networks in the Americas. In addition, 681 million people were using social media platforms in Europe. Number of social network users worldwide as of January 2023, by region (in millions) is presented on the figure below:

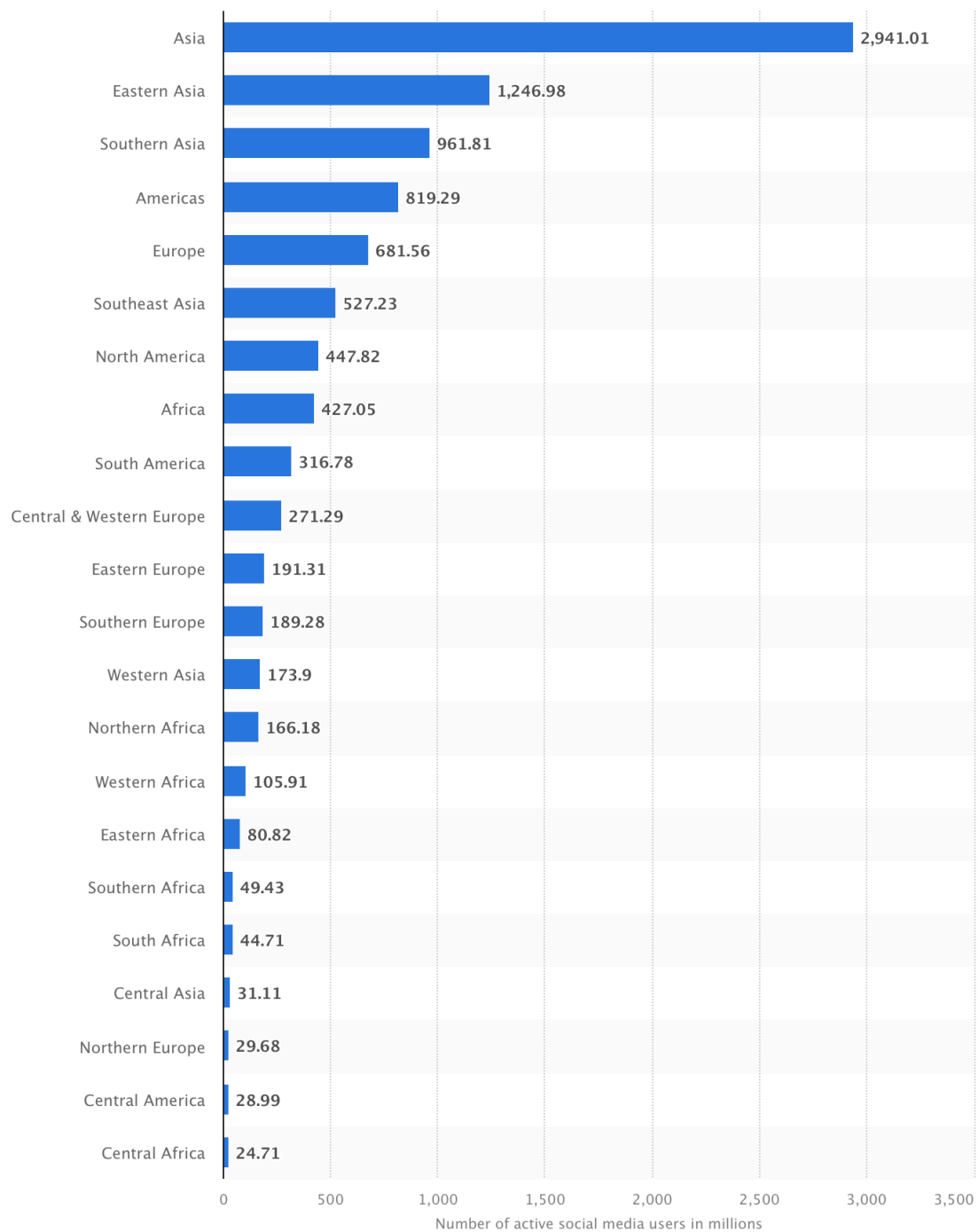


Figure 2. Number of worldwide social media users 2023, by region²²



The global social media penetration rate in was forecast to continuously increase between 2024 and 2028 by in total 11.6 (+18.19 percent). The penetration rate is estimated to reach 75.31 a new peak in 2028²³. More expectations about the number of social network users in selected countries in 2022 and 2027 (in millions) is presented below:

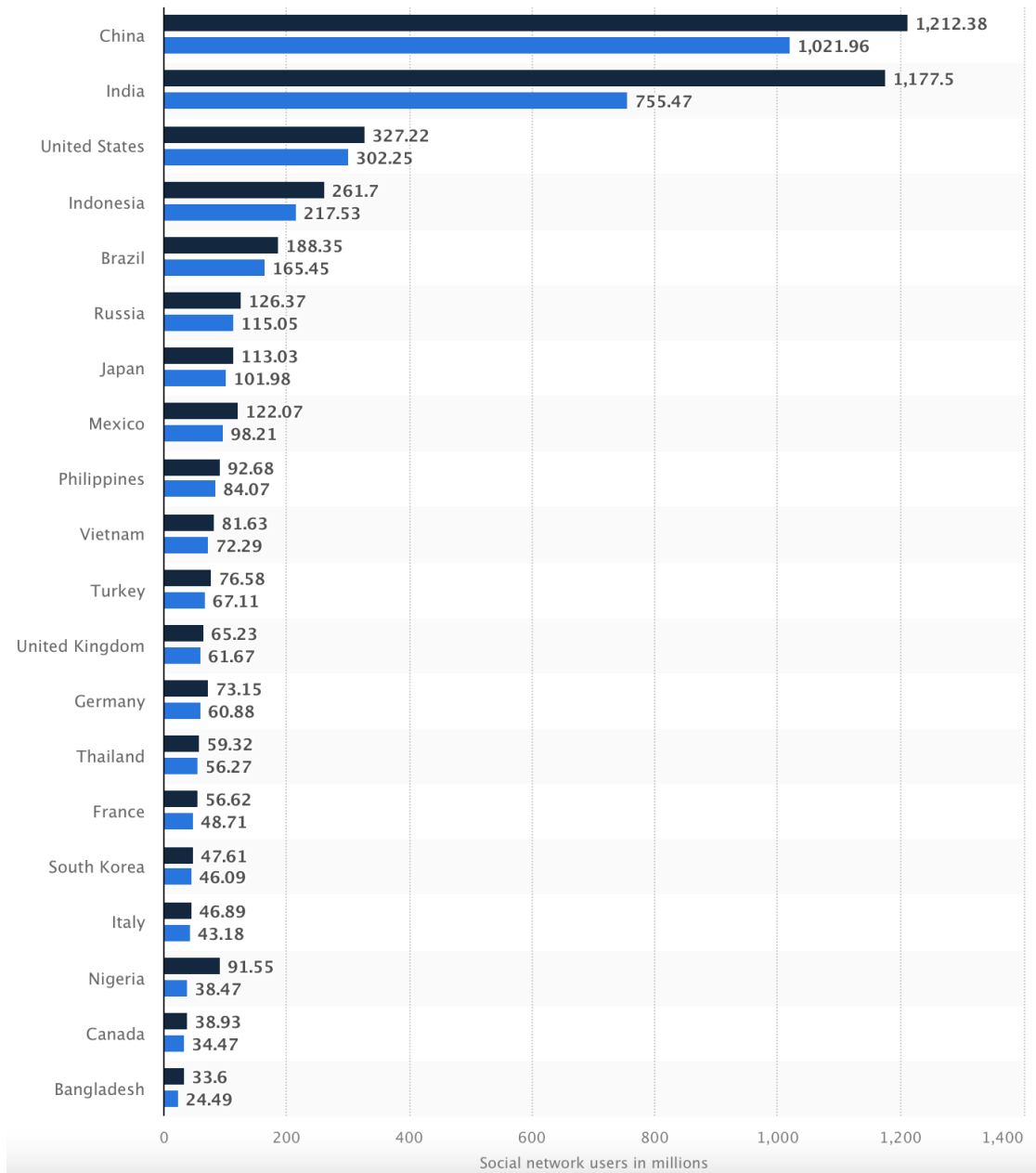


Figure 3. Social network users in selected countries in 2022 and 2027²⁴

Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users (in millions) are presented below:

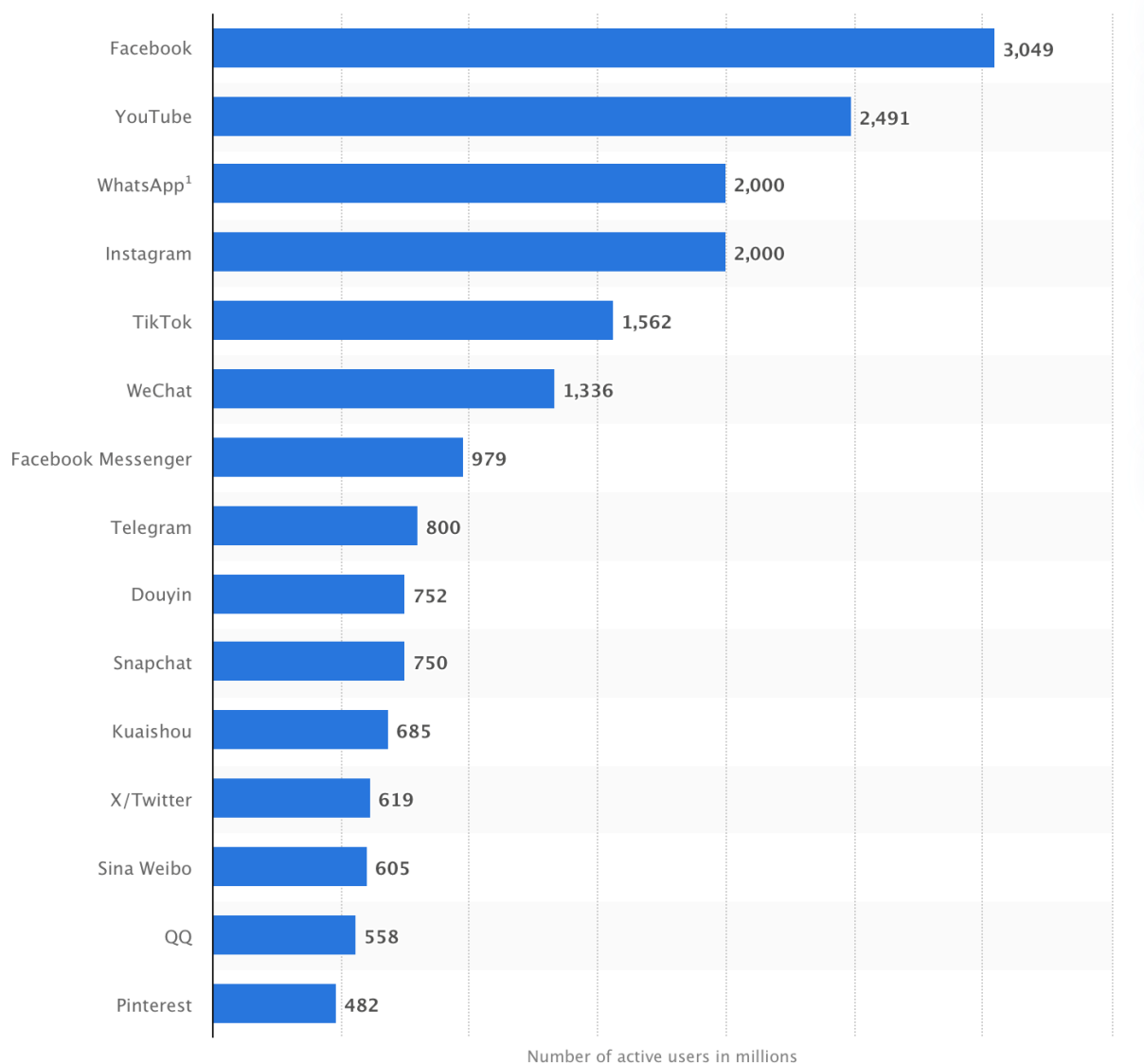


Figure 4. Global social networks ranked by number of users 2024²⁵

Market leader Facebook was the first social network to surpass one billion registered accounts and currently sits at more than three billion monthly active users. Meta Platforms owns four of the biggest social media platforms, all with one billion monthly active users each: Facebook (core platform), WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram. In the third quarter of 2023, Facebook reported around four billion monthly core Family product users.

A survey conducted in the third quarter of 2022 found that the main reason for using social media was to keep in touch with friends and family, with over 47% of social media users saying this was their main reason for using online networks.



Overall, 36.2% of social media users said that filling spare time was their main reason for using social media platforms, whilst a similar share of respondents said they used it to read news stories. One in five users were on social platforms for the reason of posting about their life²⁶.

Social networks could have 3 types of influence on their users:

1. Positive
2. Neutral
3. Negative

According to recent studies in USA amongst adults there is a significant prevalence of the negative impact on their mental health in 2023 (59% of adults). More statistics about the impact of social media on adults in 2023 is presented on the table below²⁷:

Table 1. Impact of social media on adults in 2023

Percentage	Statistics
59%	of adults who use social media report that it has impacted their mental health
41%	of women on social media report feeling pressure to present themselves in a certain way
37%	of people on social media report feeling FOMO (fear of missing out)
42%	of people on social media report feeling more insecure about their appearance after using it
37%	of people on social media report being negatively impacted by political discussions on social media

But the situation is even more alarming when it comes for **children and young people** under 18 years old. Since they do not have yet psychological coping mechanisms and experience in grown-up's reality, the influence of the social media is much more in the negative spectrum.

A global study about the time spent connected to social networks per day included more than 900,000 internet users (16-64 years old), surveyed across 47 markets in selected countries. On average, global internet users spend 2 hours and 27 minutes on social media per day, though trends differ widely by country. Emerging markets continue to spend the most time on social networks during a typical day. This could be driven by these markets generally having younger



populations, with the 16 to 24-year-old segment driving growth globally. Countries with aging populations exhibited shorter social media use (Japan and Germany). The UK and the U.S. both spent closer to two hours per day engaging with social media²⁸ (see fig below):

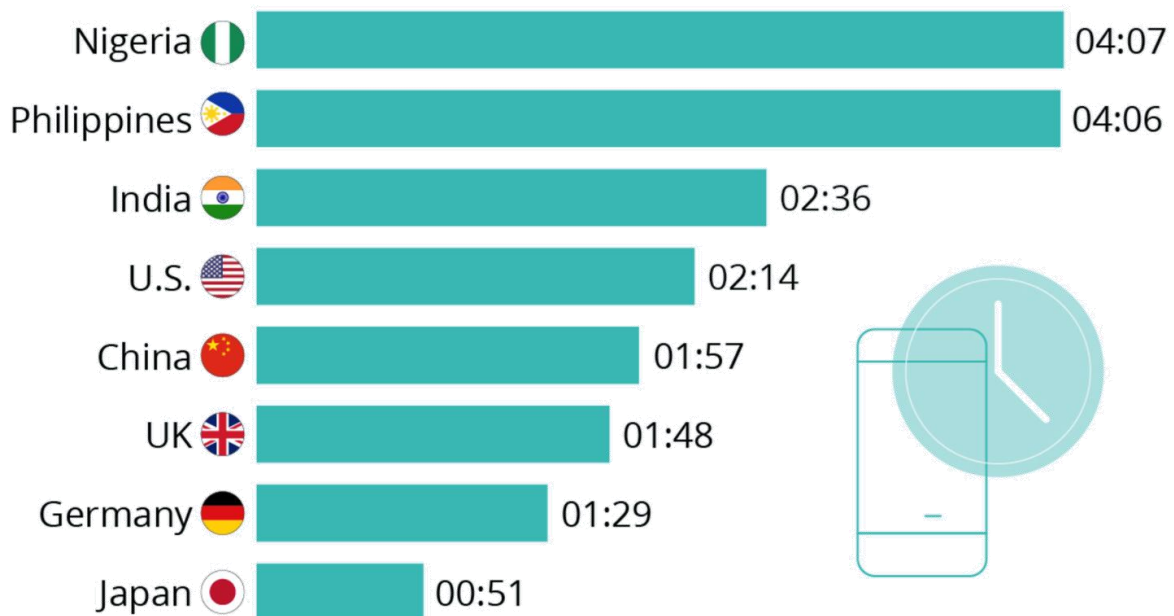


Figure 5. Average time spent connected to social networks per day in selected countries in 2021 (hh:mm)²⁹

USA

According to the Pew Research Center, 69% of adults and 81% of teens in the U.S. use social media³⁰.

Most U.S. adults use YouTube and Facebook; about half use Instagram in 2023. **YouTube** by and large is the most widely used online platform measured in the survey. Roughly eight-in-ten U.S. adults (83%) report ever using the video-based platform. While a somewhat lower share reports using it, **Facebook** is also a dominant player in the online landscape. Most Americans (68%) report using the social media platform. Additionally, roughly half of U.S. adults (47%) say they use **Instagram**. The **other sites and apps asked about are not as widely used**, but a fair portion of Americans still use them (27% to 35% of U.S. adults use Pinterest, TikTok, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and Snapchat; About one-in-five say they use Twitter (recently renamed “X”) and Reddit. BeReal, a photo-based platform launched in 2020 was used by just 3% of U.S. adults³¹ (see fig below):

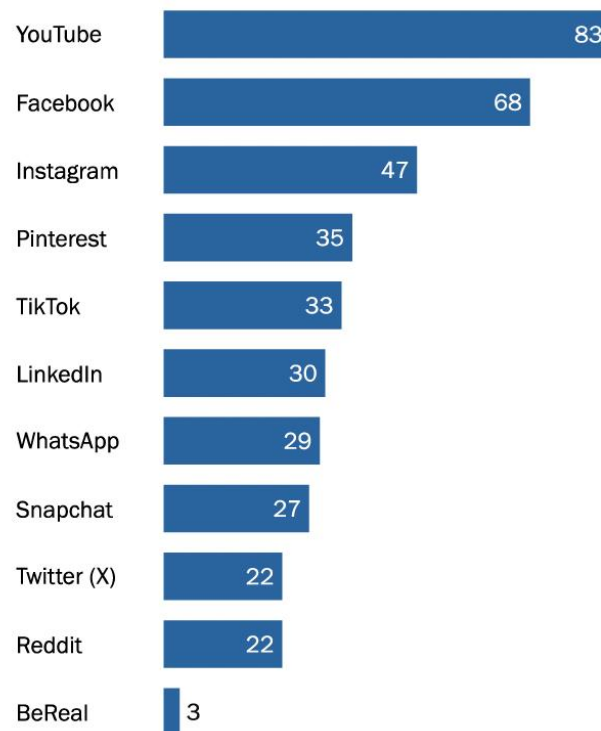


Figure 6. Which social media sites do Americans use most³²

The youngest U.S. adults are far more likely to use Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok; age differences are less pronounced for Facebook.

Virtually all teens (95%) ages 13 to 17 use social media in the USA, with more than 1 in 3 reporting that they use it “almost constantly.” While most U.S. social media platforms require users to be at least 13 years old, nearly 40% of kids ages 8 to 12 use social media. Adolescents who use social media more than three hours per day face twice the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes. A recent survey found that eighth and 10th grade students spend an average of 3.5 hours per day on these platforms³³.

A 2022 survey of teens ages 13 to 17 with about 1,300 responses found that 35% of teens use at least one of five social media platforms more than several times a day. The five social media platforms are: YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat³⁴.

According to an online survey conducted in 2022 in the United States, 45 percent of teen girls said they felt 'addicted' to TikTok, or ended up using the platform for a longer period of time than they originally wanted. Of these respondents, 32 percent reported using the app on a daily basis. Almost half of respondents stated that they felt addicted to YouTube, or used it for longer than intended,



with 37 percent of these respondents saying they used the platform daily (see figure below):

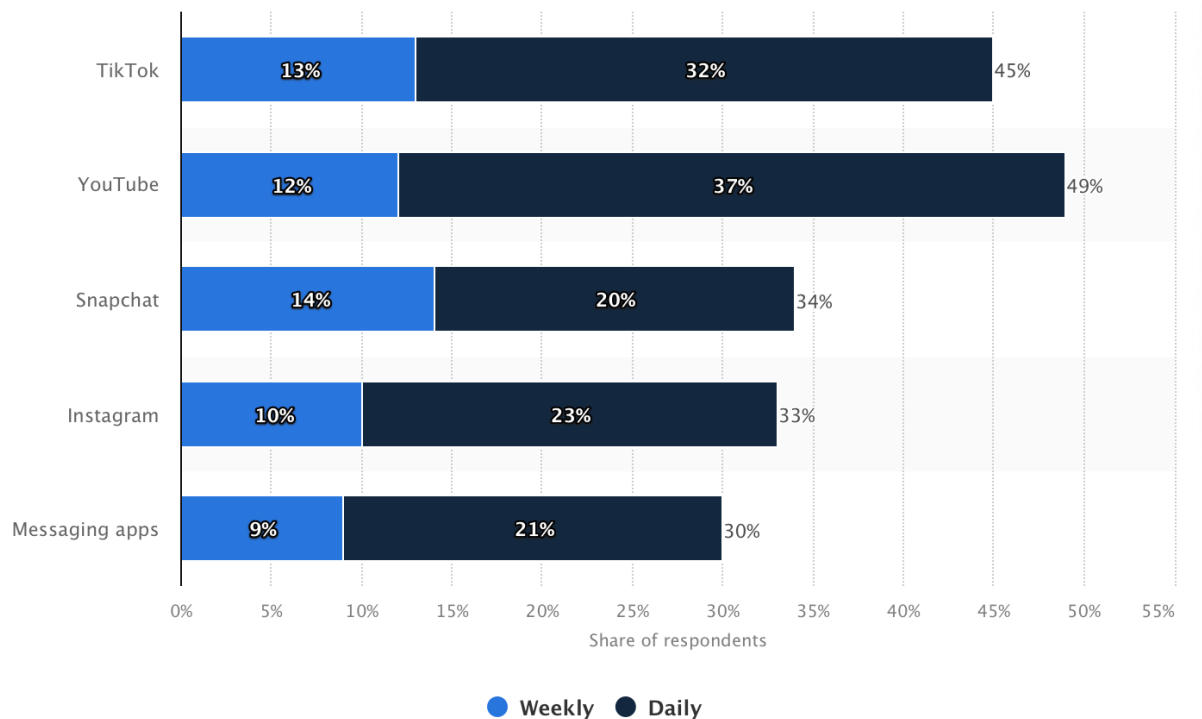


Figure 7. U.S. teen girls feeling addicted to using social media 2022, by frequency³⁵

A 2023 survey found that 35 percent of adults in the United States felt that social media was completely responsible for an increase in depression among teenagers. Overall, one-third of respondents thought that social media platforms were mostly responsible. Just two percent of U.S. adults stated that social media was not at all responsible for an increase in depression among teens³⁶.

According to a survey conducted in the United States in October 2023, 34 percent of adults felt that social media usage was very harmful for teenagers and children. Overall, 29 percent of respondents said that teens and kids' social media usage was somewhat harmful, and 27 percent felt it was extremely harmful. Additionally, around four percent of adults thought social media was completely safe for users under the age of 18.

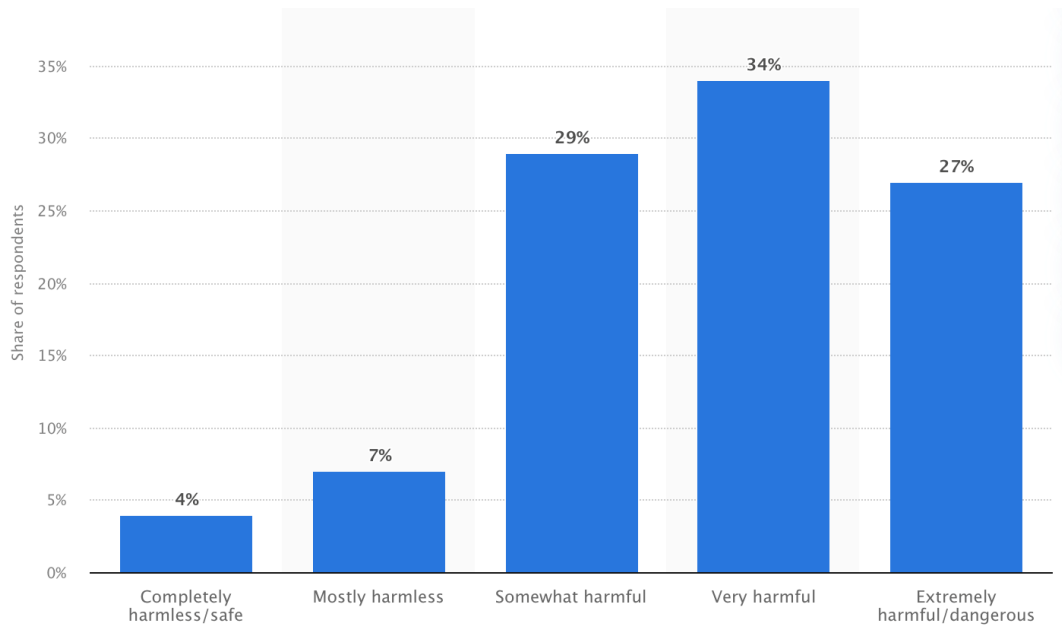


Figure 8. U.S. adults on harmfulness of social media usage for teens and kids 2023³⁷

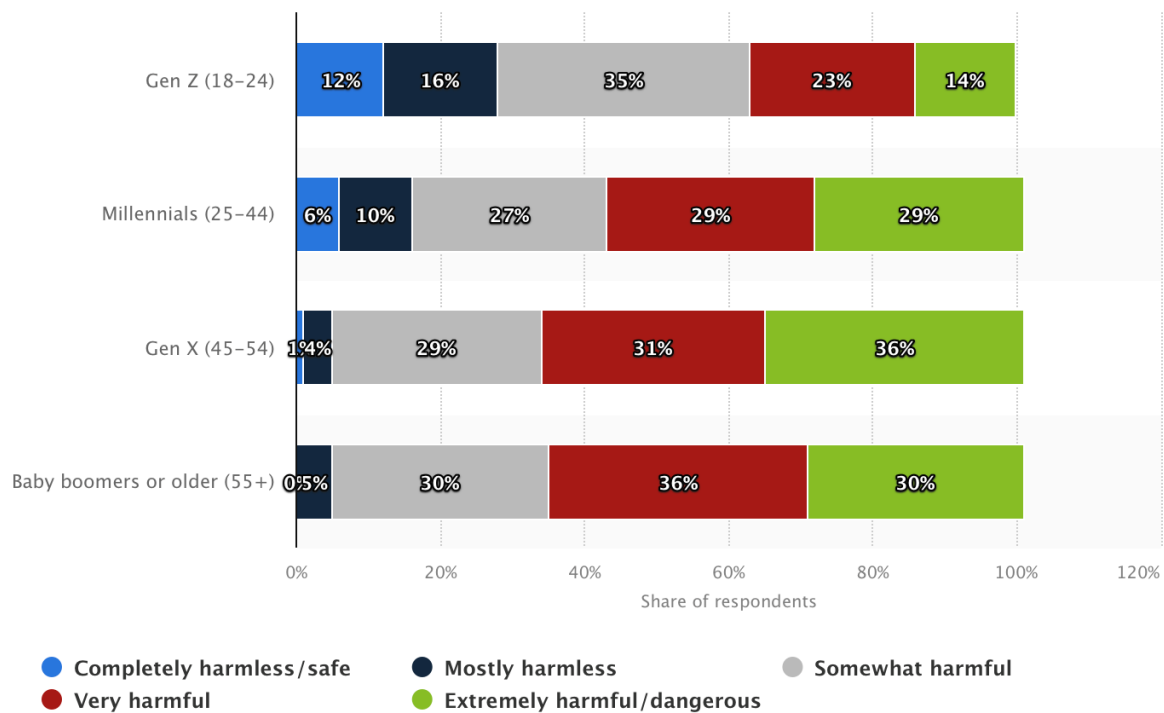


Figure 9. U.S. adults on harmfulness of social media usage for teens and kids 2023, by age³⁸

UK

Based on the results of a survey of 1,479 people aged 14 to 24 years by the UK's Royal Society for Public Health, the top 5 social networks have been ranked according to their impact on mental health. 14 factors were considered such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-image, harassment, opportunity to express oneself.

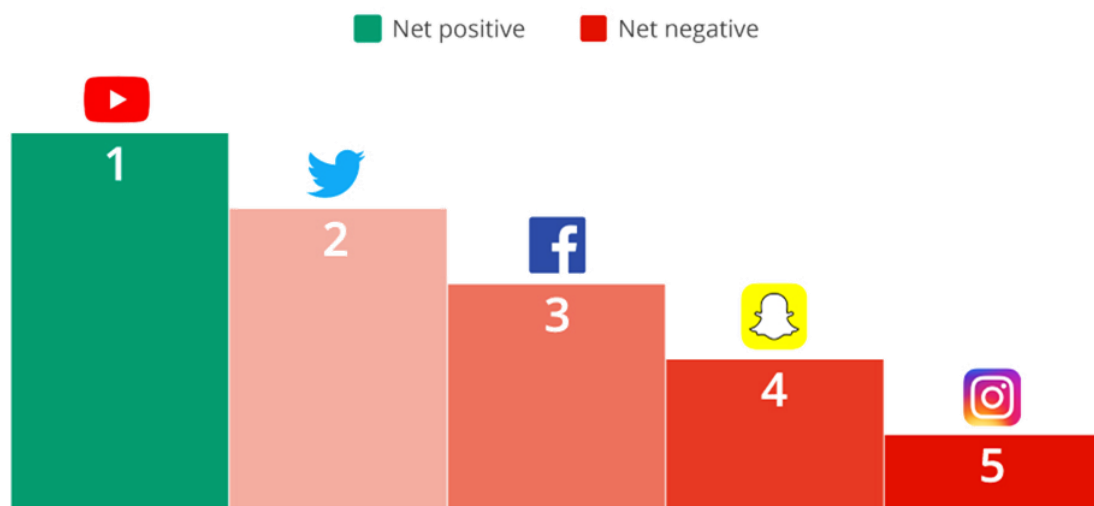


Figure 10. Ranking of social media platforms according to impact on youth mental health³⁹

It emerges that Instagram is the social media platform with the most negative effect on the psychological state of young people. On the other side, YouTube is considered to be the most positive network in this area and the only one in the research considered to have a 'net positive' influence. To establish this ranking, 14 factors were considered such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-image, harassment, and the opportunity to express oneself⁴⁰.

According to a 2023 survey conducted in the United Kingdom, 48 percent of social media users aged between 16 and 18 years reported feeling addicted to social media. Feelings of addiction were higher amongst female teens than male teens, with 57 percent of girls in the UK saying they thought they were addicted to online platforms. In general, social media can be difficult for teens to navigate, partly due to pressure to create the perfect image or partake in online challenges.

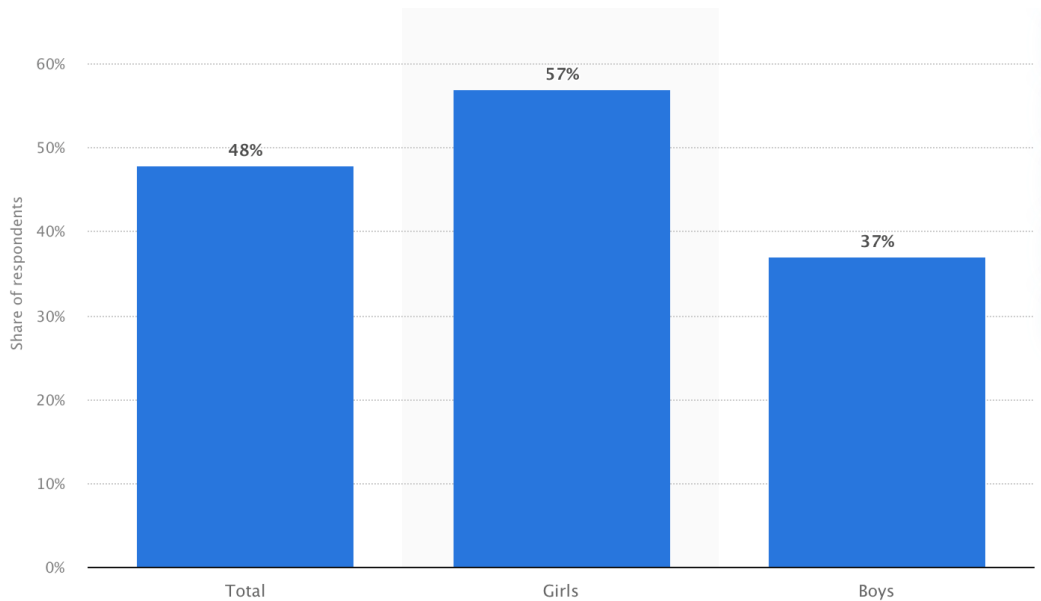


Figure 11. UK teens on being addicted to social media 2023, by gender⁴¹

The mounting evidence regarding social media's adverse effects on youth is especially concerning given that adolescence is a **critical period of development**, when different areas of the brain begin to integrate, and the prefrontal cortex develops at an accelerated pace. In this phase, the brain is especially open to learning and growing, and teens may have intensified sensitivity to the nature of social media. Adolescence also involves profound physiological changes — these young people are simultaneously navigating increasing autonomy, forming their identities, developing relationships and more. Thus, the potential effects of social media during this vulnerable phase warrant particular attention⁴².

Social media doesn't affect all teens the same way. Use of social media is linked with healthy and unhealthy effects on health. These effects vary from one teenager to another⁴³.

6. CLASSIFICATION OF RISKS, RELATED TO SOCIAL NETWORKS

By understanding different types of online harm, stakeholders can work collaboratively to develop effective policies, interventions and innovations that promote a safer digital ecosystem while respecting human rights and fostering positive online behaviors⁴⁴.



A comprehensive understanding of cyber risk and cyber harm allow a more accurate analysis of risks, associated with social media and, eventually, enable more effective risk management approaches (including methodology and handbook on prevention of those risks). In the most basic linguistic context, (cyber) harm is associated with injury or damage, which can manifest itself both physically and emotionally. Cyber harm is generally understood as the damaging consequences resulting from cyber-events, which can originate from malicious, accidental or natural phenomena, manifesting itself within or outside of the Internet. Cyber harm can thus be seen as a core component of cyber risk analysis, as it describes the negative impact upon an entity, whether individual, organizational or national. Preventing risks and harm require a proper assessment which includes the identification of:

1. Who and what can be harmed (individual, group, organizational, cultural and societal);
2. Different types of harm (physical, psychological, reputational, economic, etc.);
3. Stakeholders and their different priorities and perceptions of harm;
4. Potential measurements of harm, and analytical categories (including severity, likelihood, immediacy and direct vs. indirect harm); and
5. Who is responsible for acting upon different forms of harm (mandates).

The concept of risk mainly concerns the negative consequences and hence, the management of risk is focused on prevention and mitigation of negative impacts⁴⁵.

In „From ‘crime’ to social harm“ Hillyard and Tombs offer a basic classification of different forms of social harm as a definitional framework, which includes: physical harm, financial/economic harm, emotional/psychological harm and harm relating to cultural safety⁴⁶.

In particular, six kinds of harm are examined, namely “loss of life, injuries and illnesses, direct economic costs, social displacement, psychological distress, and environmental impact.”⁴⁷

The research on categorizations of harm provides several main harm types according to Oxford study⁴⁸:


- Physical or Digital harm (i.e. harm describing a physical or digital negative effect on someone or something);
- Economic harm (i.e. harm that relates to negative financial or economic consequences);



- Psychological harm (i.e. harm which focuses on an individual and their mental well-being and psyche);
- Reputational harm (i.e. harm pertaining to the general opinion held about an entity);
- Social and Societal harm (i.e. a capture of harms that may result in a social context or society more broadly)⁴⁹.

Recognizing the complex nature of online safety more research into risk classification is developed in the EU. In 2021 the coordination and support project “Children Online: Research and Evidence (CO:RE)” presented the CO:RE 4 C's classification, which relates threats with content, contact, conduct and contract risks⁵⁰.

Table 2. The CO:RE classification of online risk to children⁵¹

	Content Child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content	Contact Child experiences or is targeted by potentially harmful <i>adult</i> contact	Conduct Child witnesses, participates in or is a victim of potentially harmful <i>peer</i> conduct	Contract Child is party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract
Aggressive	Violent, gory, graphic, racist, hateful or extremist information and communication	Harassment, stalking, hateful behaviour, unwanted or excessive surveillance	Bullying, hateful or hostile communication or peer activity e.g. trolling, exclusion, shaming	Identity theft, fraud, phishing, scams, hacking, blackmail, security risks
Sexual	Pornography (harmful or illegal), sexualization of culture, oppressive body image norms	Sexual harassment, sexual grooming, sextortion, the generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material	Sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual messaging, adverse sexual pressures	Trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, streaming (paid-for) child sexual abuse
Values	Mis/disinformation, age-inappropriate marketing or user-generated content	Ideological persuasion or manipulation, radicalisation and extremist recruitment	Potentially harmful user communities e.g. self-harm, anti-vaccine, adverse peer pressures	Gambling, filter bubbles, micro-targeting, dark patterns shaping persuasion or purchase
Cross-cutting	Privacy violations (interpersonal, institutional, commercial) Physical and mental health risks (e.g., sedentary lifestyle, excessive screen use, isolation, anxiety) Inequalities and discrimination (in/exclusion, exploiting vulnerability, algorithmic bias/predictive analytics)			

According to a recent study of World Economic Forum online harms encompass various dimensions, including harm in content production and distribution, as well as harm in content consumption⁵²:

- **Harm in the production of content** – for example, where a person is physically harmed, and the abuse is recorded or streamed in order to



- create online material. This could include images or videos of murder, assault or the sexual abuse of adults or children;
- **Harm in the distribution of content** – for example, where an intimate image of a person is self-produced and shared voluntarily and is later shared and distributed online without their consent. That person may not have been harmed in the production of the content but is exposed to harm once their intimate image is shared. Similarly, victims who are the subject of abuse in the production of content can face compounded trauma when that content is distributed. Those who film, share or consume the content also risk being harmed. The person objectified in such content is also harmed because the distribution of that content can reinforce negative attitudes towards certain populations. Amplifying or resharing hateful comments about a minority group serves as an example that reinforces stereotypes towards the underrepresented group, perpetuating biases and inflicting further harm on these individuals;
 - **Harm in the consumption of content** – for example, where a person is negatively affected because of viewing illegal, age-inappropriate, potentially dangerous or misleading content.

By framing online harms through a human rights lens, a Typology of Online Harms was developed by the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Coalition of Digital Safety work group, constituted of senior representatives from industry, governments, civil society and academia. The typology emphasizes the impacts on individual users and aims to provide a broad categorization of harms to support global policy development. It serves as a foundation for facilitating multi stakeholder discussions and cross-jurisdictional dialogues building upon a common terminology and shared understanding of online safety. The Online Harms Typology has six main dimensions:

1. Threats to personal and community safety
2. Harm to health and well-being
3. Hate and discrimination
4. Violation of dignity
5. Invasion of privacy
6. Deception and manipulation

In more details the Online Harms Typology by World Economic Forum includes:



1. THREATS TO PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Content risks

- **Child sexual abuse material (CSAM):** Any representation by whatever means of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes;
- **Child sexual exploitation material (CSEM):** Content that sexualizes and is exploitative of the child, whether or not it shows the child's sexual abuse;
- **Pro-terror material:** Material that advocates engaging in a terrorist act because it counsels, promotes, encourages or urges engaging in a terrorist act, provides instruction on engaging in a terrorist act or directly praises engaging in a terrorist act in circumstances where there is a substantial risk that such praise might have the effect of leading a person to engage in a terrorist act;
- **Content that praises, promotes, glorifies or supports extremist organizations or individuals:** This includes content that encourages participation in, or intends to recruit individuals to, violent extremist organizations – including terrorist organizations, organized hate groups, criminal organizations and other non-state armed groups that target civilians;
- **Violent graphic content:** Content that promotes, incites, provides instruction in or depicts acts including murder, attempted murder, torture, rape and kidnapping of another person using violence or the threat of violence;
- **Content that incites, promotes or facilitates violence:** Includes content that contains direct and indirect threats of violence and intimidation;
- **Content that promotes, incites or instructs in dangerous physical behavior:** Content that promotes, incites or provides instruction in activities conducted in a nonprofessional context that may lead to serious injury or death for the user or members of the public.

Contact risks

- **Grooming for sexual abuse:** When someone uses the internet to deliberately establish an emotional connection with a young person to lower their inhibitions and make it easier to have sexual contact with them. It may involve an adult posing as a child in an internet application



to befriend a child and encourage them to behave sexually online or to meet in person;

- **Recruitment and radicalization:** Includes posting or engaging with individuals with the purpose of recruiting individuals to a designated or dangerous organization.

Conduct risks

- **Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA):** Using digital technology to enable, assist or amplify abuse or coercive control of a person or group of people;
- **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence:** A subset of technology-facilitated abuse that captures any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified using information communication technologies or other digital tools, resulting in or likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm or other infringements of rights and freedoms based on gender characteristics.

Content, contact, conduct and risks

- **Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA):** Can refer to content (e.g. CSAM), contact (e.g. grooming) and conduct (e.g. live streaming).

2. HARM TO HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Content risks

- **Material that promotes suicide, self-harm and disordered eating:** Content that promotes suicidal or self-injurious behavior. Includes content that promotes, encourages, coordinates or provides instructions on: Suicide – Self-injury, including depictions of graphic self-injury imagery. Eating disorders, including expressing desire for an eating disorder, sharing tips or coaching on disordered eating, or encouraging participation in unhealthy body measurement challenges;
- **Developmentally inappropriate content:** Includes children's access to pornography, particularly of a violent or extreme nature, and graphic, violent material.



3. HATE AND DISCRIMINATION

Online hate and discrimination can negatively affect a person's mental health, general well-being and online engagement. It can also, in the most extreme cases, lead to harassment and violence offline.

Content risks

- **Hate speech:** Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group based on their inherent/ protected characteristics – in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, ancestry, gender or other identity factor. Includes dehumanization, which targets individuals or groups by calling them subhuman, comparing them to animals, insects, pests, disease or any other non-human entity.

Conduct risks

- **Algorithmic discrimination:** A decision that results in the denial of financial and lending services, housing, insurance, education enrolment, criminal justice, employment opportunities, healthcare services or access to basic necessities, such as food and water.

4. VIOLATION OF DIGNITY

Conduct risks

- **Online bullying and harassment:** The use of technology to bully someone – to deliberately engage in hostile behavior to hurt them socially, emotionally, psychologically or even physically. This can include abusive texts and emails; hurtful messages, images or videos; excluding others; spreading damaging gossip and chat; or creating fake accounts to trick or humiliate someone.

Contact risks

- **Sexual extortion:** the blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favors, money or other benefits from them under the threat of sharing the material



beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media).

5. INVASION OF PRIVACY:

Conduct risks

- **Doxxing:** The intentional online exposure of an individual's identity, personal details or sensitive information without their consent and with the intention of placing them at risk of harm;
- **Image-based abuse:** Sharing, or threatening to share, an intimate image or video without the consent of the person shown. An "intimate image/video" is one that, where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy, shows nudity, sexual poses, private activity such as showering or someone without the religious or cultural clothing they would normally wear in public.

6. DECEPTION AND MANIPULATION

Content risks

- **Disinformation and misinformation:** Misinformation involves the dissemination of incorrect facts, where individuals may unknowingly share or believe false information without the intent to mislead. Disinformation involves the deliberate and intentional spread of false information with the aim of misleading others. Includes gendered disinformation that specifically targets women political leaders, journalists and other public figures, employing deceptive or inaccurate information and images to perpetuate stereotypes and misogyny;
- **Deceptive synthetic media:** Content that has been generated or manipulated via algorithmic processes (such as artificial intelligence or machine learning) to appear as though based on reality, when it is, in fact, artificial and seeks to harm a particular person or group of people. Includes deep fakes, which are realistic – although fake – images, audio or video clips that show a real person doing or saying something that they did not actually do or say.



Conduct risks

- **Impersonation:** Posing as an existing person, group or organization in a confusing or deceptive manner;
- **Scams:** Dishonest schemes that seek to manipulate and take advantage of people to gain benefits such as money or access to personal details;
- **Phishing:** The sending of fraudulent messages, pretending to be from organizations or people the receiver trusts, to try and steal details such as online banking logins, credit card details and passwords from the receiver;
- **Catfishing:** The use of social media to create a false identity, usually to defraud or scam someone. People who catfish often make up fake backgrounds, jobs or friends to appear as another person. Using this fake identity, they may trick someone into believing they are in an online romance before asking the person to send money, gifts or nude images.

In terms of practice, risk classification is useful for⁵³:

- Identifying the range and diversity of risks, including emerging risks;
- Making comparisons and capturing trends across risks and across time/ contexts;
- Systematically communicating results and priorities to both expert and lay audiences;
- Highlighting the need for resources, budget and training;
- Classifying the types of risks reported via input from helplines and complaints mechanisms;
- Targeting planning, interventions and awareness-raising campaigns;
- Mapping evidence to risk categories and identifying evidence gaps.

7. RISKS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The risks for young people in social media platforms are many and diverse. The nature of online safety is challenging and requires an organized approach. Therefore, the risks, presented in this chapter are divided into several groups, according to the European classification of risks for children online⁵⁴:

- **Contact related risks** when child experiences or is targeted by potentially harmful adult contact;
- **Conduct related risks** when child witnesses, participates in or is a victim of potentially harmful peer conduct;



- **Content related risks** when child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content;
- **Contract related risks** when child is party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract;
- **Cross-cutting related risks**, including privacy violations (interpersonal, institutional, commercial), physical and mental health risks (e.g., sedentary lifestyle, excessive screen use, isolation, anxiety) and inequalities and discrimination (in/exclusion, exploiting vulnerability, algorithmic bias/predictive analytics).

GROUP 1: CONTACT RELATED RISKS

INTERACTIONS AND ENCOUNTERS WITH STRANGERS

The term “stranger danger” was coined as a warning to children: beware the unknown adult, proceed with caution and be very careful what personal information you reveal. The question is, do teens take this advice? Perhaps most would be more guarded and make sure they know who they are dealing with before revealing too much about themselves. But our relationship with “strangers” has been evolving and social media has torn down some of the barriers that used to protect us. Now a relative stranger could be a Facebook “friend” and evidence shows that sexual predators are using this to their advantage. How we transition from stranger to non-stranger relationships is a relatively unexplored strand in research, with little recognition paid to the fact that the internet has completely transformed our level of engagement with strangers.

One in three relationships now starts online. The change in how people communicate in their day-to-day lives has impacted the “modus operandi” of sexual offenders. The online environment has evolved a “new type of sexual offender”. The vast amount of dating and social networking sites easily accessed through smartphones has resulted in the normalization of providing personal information to strangers. Even Snapchat now allows users to share their exact location. People are able to see your every move from your home location, work, school or college⁵⁵.

Some of the potential dangers are:

- The person could end up being a kidnapper or participate in human trafficking;



- You could start forming a relationship with someone who is dangerous. If you simply start speaking to a stranger that isn't known to anyone in your immediate circle, you won't really know what sort of person the stranger is. You could proceed to form a friendship or relationship with this person and only find out too late that they are a criminal or unstable.
- You might unwittingly give too much information away. With identity theft becoming such a big thing in today's society, a simple conversation with a stranger could put you in danger. You might end up giving things away, such as your full name, contact number, address.
- You could end up feeling pressured to agree to things you wouldn't do normally.
- The stranger might be trying to sexually solicit you.
- You could be mugged or assaulted when meeting them in person.
- You could end up being scammed.
- A stranger given attention might become a nuisance in the future.
- You could end up getting hurt emotionally⁵⁶.

Snapchat states that their default setting is "off" for location-sharing and users must activate it. They claim that locations can only be shared with your friends list. Given our friendship circles are continually changing and our friends' lists are likely to contain people we have never met, how practical is this safety feature? Grooming techniques are individually tailored to meet victims' expectations. From minors sexual grooming research, we know that trust is key in developing relationships online, with boundaries slowly broken down before introducing sexualized conversations. In cases initiated through online dating that resulted in sexual assaults, sexual communication was reported in over 50% of cases prior to meeting, with online contact to first meeting occurring within a week for 43% of cases. The frequency and intensity of interactions allows victims to feel comfortable and shifts the perception of the relationship from stranger to non-stranger quicker than offline encounters⁵⁷.

Online dating for the purpose of sexual abuse generally refers to the process of befriending and influencing a child (under the age of 18) through social media to facilitate contact with the teenager. Through the process of befriending, the perpetrator tries to gain the trust of the victim to maintain secrecy and avoid detection and punishment. Sexual extortion can occur as a feature of online dating for the purpose of sexual abuse or as a stand-alone crime. While extortion can occur without the online dating process, in some cases online dating can lead to extortion. Sexual extortion can occur in the context of online befriending, as



the offender manipulates and influences to sexually abuse through threats and intimidation⁵⁸.

For young people dating online isn't just about using dating apps – it's about how relationships develop on social media and through private messaging. The more youth explore the realm of romance online, they may experience unwelcome advances, sexually explicit pictures and general harassment via social media, chat forums and sites, dating apps or messaging services such as WhatsApp and Snapchat. With a tendency to seek validation online so when it comes to dating, they may be more likely to do or say inappropriate things to gain acceptance with someone they may be in a relationship with. And for instance, if in the wrong hands, an inappropriate text or photo, can perpetuate bullying, emotional abuse, revenge porn, harassment, embarrassment, low self-esteem, even depression⁵⁹.

Though the first online chat options came about in the 1970s, the first chatrooms that resemble the version of online chat we know today first popped up in the 1980s. Since that time, online web chat options that allow us to talk to strangers and the people we already know have grown substantially. Despite the evolution of these platforms, one thing is for sure; it's still crucial to utilize caution when talking to people on the internet. It is like the appeal of an anonymous chat room, which you need to be cautious too.

The internet is a playground for people who want to commit identity theft and financial fraud. They can pose as old friends, distant family, or simply a person in need without much effort. This is an easy way to make kind-hearted people who want to help others, into victims. Seeking your full name, age, address, and any banking or credit card information, where you work or go to school and how much money you make. People might receive unsolicited emails or messages from people asking for financial help. Popular internet scams include the "Nigerian Scam" and various fake accounts posing as disaster relief services. By asking for money, promises about making money quickly, and unexpected checks or job offers. Product scams are another potential threat.

Scams and catfishing are so successful online because you can never really be sure who is who in the digital world. This is especially dangerous in the case of adults who pursue relationships with someone underage. Most of the time, a predator knows exactly what they are doing. They will either pose as a child who wants a romantic relationship with a peer or simply a friendly adult who wishes to gain a child's trust. Although no physical contact occurs in these cases, the



relationship can still cross into illegal territory quickly. Predators often try to use their new-found influence to have illicit conversations or get inappropriate pictures of minors. Child pornography is illegal, and it is a very real threat in the online world. Underaged minors often fall a victim to grooming tactics that an online predator uses to get close. A predator says that they're "mature for their age," and since many children or teens take this as a compliment, they may believe it and enter a relationship (romantic or otherwise) with a predator that could harm them. A predator might also give a child a gift or opportunity to draw them in.

By posting a vacation, a strangers can tell when a home is vacant. This may lead to possible break-in. By constantly checking into places around your city, predators will know exactly where to find you if they want to. The more you post on social media, the more a stranger can learn about you. They can use all the information provided by you to stalk you or make you the victim of a crime. In addition to targeting you, a stranger may get close to you to target someone you know, including your children⁶⁰.

GROUP 2: CONDUCT RELATED RISKS

CYBERBULLYING

The term cyberbullying or cyber harassment represents a form of bullying or harassment using electronic means. Cyberbullying is also known as online bullying. A commonly used definition of cyberbullying is "an aggressive, intentional act or behavior that is committed by a group or individual using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves". It becomes more common, especially among teenagers, as the digital realm has expanded, and technology has advanced. It should be distinguished from the normal conflicts between people of comparable power or status that often occur online.

There are many variations on the definition like: "Cyberbullying is defined as intentional and repeated harm caused by computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices", or "Cyberbullying is when someone is bullying others in digital spaces, especially social networking sites by repeated behavior and intent to harm" or "the process of using the Internet, mobile phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person". Cyberbullying is a continuum of bullying and a form of harassment in an online



environment. Cyberbullying is often like traditional bullying, with some notable differences. Victims of cyberbullying may not know the identity of their bully or why the bully is targeting them based on the online nature of the interaction. Harassment can have far-reaching effects on the victim because the content used to harass the victim can be easily distributed and shared among many people and often remains accessible long after the initial incident.

Cyberbullying can be as simple as sending harassing emails to someone who has said they no longer want contact with the sender. It may also include public actions such as repeated threats, sexual remarks, posting rumors, victims' personal information, using pejorative labels (i.e. hate speech) or defamatory false accusations, organizing a victim by making the person the object of ridicule in online forums, hacking or vandalizing sites about a person and posting false statements of fact intended to discredit or humiliate a targeted person. Cyberbullying can be limited to posting rumors about an individual on the Internet with the intention of inciting hatred in the minds of others or persuading others to dislike or engage in online denigration of a target. It can go as far as personally identifying crime victims and publishing material that defames or humiliates them. Cyberbullies may reveal victims' personal details (e.g. real name, home address or workplace/ schools) on websites or forums - called doxing, or may use impersonation, creation of fake accounts, comments or sites that present for their purpose to publish material on their behalf that defames, discredits or ridicules them. This can leave the cyberbully anonymous, which can make it harder to catch them or punish their behavior, although not all cyberbullies retain their anonymity. Users of semi-anonymous chat websites are at high risk of cyberbullying as it is also easy in this outlet for cyberbullying to remain anonymous. Text or instant messages and emails between friends can also constitute cyberbullying if what is said is offensive.

Cyberbullying is in many cases occurs alongside offline bullying that takes place at school or elsewhere. It may have additional racist, religious or sexist dimensions, and may be a continuation of harm caused offline, such as by hacking accounts, sharing photos and videos online and the 24/7 nature of harmful messages and the availability of content. Students who have been bullied online have in most cases been bullied in other, more traditional ways before (e.g. physically or verbally). Few students are bullied exclusively on the Internet; these cyber victims are often physically stronger students, leading bullies to prefer online confrontations to face-to-face contact at school. Research shows several serious consequences of cyberbullying victimization.



Some researchers point out that there may be some way to use modern computer techniques to identify and stop cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is harmful for the following reasons⁶¹:

- Cyberbullying behaviors are carried out from a distance and can be instantly broadcasted to a large number of people;
- Cyberbullying does not require physical strength or face-to-face contact. Therefore, the bullies are more confident and harsher;
- Messages are sometimes sent anonymously so those targeted have no idea who is responsible;
- Cyberbullying can happen anywhere at any time, even in places where you normally feel safe such as your home.

The effects of cyberbullying can be devastating for the victims and can have a lot of negative effects the youth. Those who are cyberbullied may display the same behavioral changes as those who are bullied in more traditional ways. Victims of cyberbullying may experience a variety of^{62, 63}:

Negative psychological effects:

- **negative emotional reactions, including:** anger, shame, fear, frustration, sadness, humiliation, low self-esteem, inability to trust others;
- **mental health problems, including:** hurt feelings, sadness, loneliness, anxiety, depression or other more serious mental health problems;

Negative behavioral effects:

- **withdrawal, seclusion, isolation, avoidance of social relationships** - victims of cyberbullying may also have trouble forming relationships with other people. They may be afraid to trust anyone and may not want to socialize with others;
- **poor academic or professional performance**, as victims may be too embarrassed to go to school or work, participate in teams, they may have troubles concentrating and perform lower than they usually would; consequently, it's not uncommon for them to be absent or even behave in such a way that results in suspension.
- **using drugs or alcohol:** People, harassed online are more likely to engage in substance abuse.



- **carrying a weapon:** Even more concerning is the fact that victims are more likely to bring a weapon to school and social events.
- **bullying others to feel in control;**
- **self-harm, increased suicidal ideation and in extreme cases – suicide.** Sometimes targets of cyberbullying respond to their intense feelings by harming themselves in some way. For instance, some might engage in self-harm such as cutting or burning themselves. In fact, research has consistently linked bullying and self-harm. Cyberbullying also increases the risk of suicide. If constantly tormented by peers through text messages, instant messaging, social media, or apps, they often begin to feel hopeless and that the only way to relieve the pain is ending their life. As a result, they may fantasize about dying in order to escape.

Negative physical effects:

The feelings of overwhelm and stress can manifest physically as:

- **Neurological issues:** headache disorders like migraine, tension-type headache, cluster headache etc.
- **Gastrointestinal issues:** The stress of bullying also can cause or worsen conditions like upset stomach, abdominal pain, and stomach ulcers. Some may also struggle with frequent nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.
- **Disordered eating:** Those cyberbullied may experience changes in eating habits like skipping meals or binge eating. Because their lives feel out of control, they look to their eating patterns as something they can control. These efforts may morph into a full-blown eating disorder, especially if the bullying has caused a distorted body image.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Experiencing cyberbullying can impact a person's sleep patterns. They may suffer from sleep issues like insomnia, sleeping more than usual, or nightmares.

Cyberbullying can affect also bullies and witnesses - they also may feel scared, helpless, and sad; they may also have trouble sleeping and eating and may even develop anxiety and depression⁶⁴.

Research suggests an increase in cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many youths and adults have been quarantined at home and, as a result, being online more often than before the pandemic. For example, a study of adults published in the Journal of Social Psychology identified statistically significant increases in cyberbullying attitudes as well as offensive behaviors



related to cyberbullying⁶⁵. However, another study of over 6,500 Canadian youth in grades 4 to 12 found no higher rates of cyberbullying involvement. The authors speculate that this may be the result of parents more closely monitoring and engaging in online activities while their children are at home⁶⁶.

Not every negative interaction on social media can be attributed to cyberbullying. Research shows that there are also interactions online that lead to peer pressure, which can have a negative, positive, or neutral impact on those involved.

Generally, it is a social issue rather than a criminal one. Policies to deal with cyberbullying require a holistic approach that involves schools, families and most importantly the children themselves.

CYBER STALKING

Cyberstalking is another form of bullying or harassment that uses electronic communications to stalk a victim. This is considered more dangerous than other forms of cyberbullying because it usually involves a credible threat to the victim's safety. Cyberstalks may send repeated messages designed to threaten or harass, and may encourage others to do the same, either explicitly or by posing as their victim and asking others to contact them⁶⁷.

Cyberstalking is the use of the Internet or other electronic means to stalk or harass an individual, group or organization. It may include false accusations, libel and slander. It may also include surveillance, identity theft, threats, vandalism, solicitation of sex, doxing, or extortion. Doxing (or doxxing) is the act of publicly providing personal information about an individual or organization, usually over the Internet without their consent. The term is used interchangeably to refer to both the collection of this information from public databases and social networking websites (such as Facebook) and the publication of personal information previously obtained through criminal or other fraudulent means (such as hacking and social engineering). Doxing can be done for reasons such as online shaming, extortion, and to assist law enforcement vigilance. They may also be associated with hacktivism⁶⁸.

Cyberstalking is often accompanied by real-time or offline stalking. For example, in California (USA) both are criminal offenses. Both are motivated by a desire to control, intimidate or influence the victim. The stalker can be an online stranger or someone the target knows. They can be anonymous and seek participation from other people online who don't even know the target⁶⁹.



INTERNET TROLLS

Internet trolling is a common form of harassment that takes place in an online community (such as online games or social networks) to cause a reaction or embarrassment, or simply for one's personal entertainment⁷⁰.

Internet trolls⁷¹ deliberately try to provoke or offend others to get a reaction. Trolls and cyberbullies do not always have the same goals: while some trolls engage in cyberbullying, others may be engaged in relatively harmless mischief. A troll can be destructive either for their own fun or because they are a real fighter.

In slang, a troll is a person who posts or makes inflammatory, disingenuous, misleading, irrelevant or off-topic messages online (such as in a social networking site, newsgroup, forum, chat room, online video game) or in real life, with the intent to provoke others to show emotional reactions or manipulate the perception of others. The behavior is usually for the troll's amusement or to achieve a specific result, such as disrupting a rival's online activities or purposefully cause confusion or harm to other online users.

INFLUENCERS AND BAD ROLE MODELS

In the age of social media, most people know of or follow some social media influencers. Social media influencers are users who have a significant number of followers with established credibility. Social media influencers have a huge impact on online culture, often serving as role models and mentors to the young people who follow them. Influencers promote a certain lifestyle, different products and brands, as well as original content on their social media pages.

The current rise in social media influencers and the power of the influence made this impact significant. Previous generations used to obsess over celebrities and stars, but nowadays, social media influencers have more influence than traditional celebrities. The negative impacts of influencers may promote unhealthy habits, reduce social interactions skills and lead to mental health conditions, such as body dysmorphia. A picture-perfect life that influencers portray on social media has a negative impact on teens. The unrealistic body figures, branded dresses, and makeup, advanced gadgets, and even what movies and series to watch, and what music to listen to, they watch them, talk about and try to adapt it into their lives. All of it has an impact on the teens, in addition to the peer pressure which already exists in the society. And if any of this is



missing in their life, they feel unfit and go through emotional and mental trauma as they try to fit in and feel accepted. This unrealistic approach towards life portrayed by influencers on social media has affected the mental health of many teens leading them to depression and anxiety. The influencers have the power to affect their choices and lure them to buy the products they advertise.

The behavior of influencers from the perspective of psychology

At their core, humans are creatures of habit. Some patterns of behavior are embedded in our upbringing or are learned tendencies that are repeated over and over again and that influence our behavior. Much of marketing is based on human psychology and trends in consumer behavior. Understanding why we act the way we do is an important step in reaching consumers naturally. Influencers are a modern form of digital outreach to the end user, but just because it's a virtual advertising method doesn't mean it doesn't draw its influence from psychology. There is a deep-rooted psychological basis for this form of digital marketing that uses several different inherent human traits to reach new customers. The psychology of influence revolves around the concept that people can be influenced to do things. Influence is often an unconscious act. People aren't always aware of when they're being influenced, which is why it works. Many people want to be different from others, but they also seek a sense of belonging. They feel safe when they make choices that they think are popular with others or that make them fit in. People often find it difficult to make decisions. One way to avoid making the wrong decision is to follow someone else's suggestion. People generally tend to go along with suggestions made by someone they consider a trusted expert or trusted friend. Understanding influencer psychology is an important step toward understanding the appeal of this type of behavior.

Halo Effect

The halo effect is something that underlies influencer behavior. The influencers we follow on social media are usually people we look up to and aspire to. These are people we generally have a positive impression of. No one wants someone they don't like on their social media, so we follow people we visually like and are charismatic. The halo effect is our tendency to let our positive feelings about the person positively influence our tendency to follow, trust and possibly emulate them. This is what influencer behavior is based on: our tendency to trust the people we put on a pedestal. People who follow influencers value their opinion because they trust them and respect them as people.



Addiction to attractiveness

Attractiveness biases are based on the human tendency to see attractive people as more intelligent, competent, and social than less attractive people, i.e. a subjectively constructed vague assessment of a person's capabilities. This cognitive bias dictates many areas in our society. The addiction to famous and charismatic personalities, such as influencers, is based on the need for a role model, or in other words, an idol, who embodies our dreams and desires. Often, people who blindly follow influencers are those who feel an unconscious need for a leader to lead them and to embody the unconscious patterns of behavior that society will accept.

How do influencers influence?

1. Authority and informational social influence

We are wired to follow the superior, the authority, and the wise. From our early days we follow and imitate our parents and elders. Since then, we instinctively follow people who are worth following - following the authority, the model of behavior that could be better. Influencers today perfectly fit these criteria. Informational social influence is a well-established psychological theory. It refers to the idea of changing behavior, opinion after considering and/or following people we believe have the right information. Perceived power also relates to influencer psychology because of its relationship to expertise and field knowledge. Experience, perceived power, and degree of influence all have a direct relationship between them. The higher the experience, the stronger the influence.

2. Social proximity and connectedness

Everyone is fascinated by someone's charismatic and influential presence. Hence comes the effect of the influence of social networks - instilling a personal attitude and presence in the person's life. Influencers are today's role models. Connecting with influencers is on a personal level. They regularly interact with their followers through live events, comment replies, online live sessions. This means how narrow the social distance is between the influencer and the influenced. The influencer shares his personal life with his followers and makes them a part of his life. This creates a sense of empathy and personal presence of the personality and participation in the life of the influencer.



3. Social envy

The influencer always compares his life with the lives of others on social networks in a different and unobtrusive way. Frequent exposure to content that showcases luxurious lifestyles and possessions increases envy. The impulse to buy the exact same things to copy the same lifestyle increases the purchases.

4. Social validation

The influence of influencers in social networks as factors of social influence, are the basis of decision-making among young people, followers of influencers. Social proof basically translates to "if the majority or large group of people think something is right, then I should follow it." This proof of social acceptance acts as a catalyst in all our decisions. An influencer with a follower base builds the foundation for trust and social proof. Agreeing with the influencer's opinion and making decisions accordingly adds validity to followers' lives. This affirmation encourages us to follow in their footsteps. Also, comments and upvotes from other followers are the most organic and authentic forms of review nowadays, which is the best use of social proof.

Risks, related to influencers

Social media users try to find and make new relationships, and one of them is these social media influencers. Though the influencers have many people who follow them, they create engaging content and engage with their followers individually. So, this builds a relationship between the influencers and their followers. And this is one of the reasons that the people listen to their advice and believe in their recommendations, as they connect with them at an individual level. This engagement or connection also makes the follower feel special as they feel that they are being heard. So, the advice and believe in the recommendations that the influencers give through their content seem believable⁷². There are many risks, related to the blind belief in influencers, like:

- **The image of a “perfect life”:** One of the main risks of influencers is the fact that they have the ability to create the image of a “perfect life” through carefully curated posts. Many put up pictures and videos of their clothes, material possessions, or seemingly flawless selfies. However, these images – particularly those that depict the face or body - could be edited or filtered, and children who aspire to be like them could develop



a sense of low self-esteem or self-worth if they can't achieve the same look. Because of filters and photo-altering techniques, social media posts created by influencers can promote unrealistic body standards. In fact, more young influencers are undergoing cosmetic procedures in return for promotions. These practices further distance influencers from their followers, leaving fans to feel they have to "catch up" to those they follow.

- **Comparisons:** Social media influencers create comparisons. Young people have enough peer pressure from in-person interactions without adding stress from social media influencers. Since influencers often present a clean, shiny, and fun version of their lives, it can create a sense of comparison for young followers. This increased social comparison has been linked to anxiety, depression, sleep issues, and negative body image among youth. When they cannot achieve the fake standard, they may get depressed, feel frustration and hatred toward themselves. They develop body image issues and other mental health issues. Some even develop severe eating disorders such as bulimia. Back in the days of traditional advertising, everything was clear: nobody believed that the movie star sat around drinking coffee made from capsules all day or even that he had the slightest idea about coffee or that his desirability was due to a certain fragrance or that he always drove that particular car. He had just been paid to be associated with the product, and that was it. We all knew where we were. But with influencer marketing, the idea is to deceive, to make believe that a recommendation is genuine and to hide the fact that there is a contract, or worse still, fake it till you make it to try to gain the prestige required for brands to pay you to hawk their stuff.
- **Revenue generation:** Many influencers are not focused on health promotion but on revenue generation. By striving to be or look like them their followers will use or do anything their role model tells them to. Influencers may expose young people to unhealthy products and themes. Food and drink companies often turn to social media influencers to promote their products through sponsored posts that show the influencer enjoying the product. Unfortunately, not only can these posts blend as authentic content, but they can also promote unhealthy behavior, such as nicotine or alcohol use, junk food, supplements dangerous gadgets etc. When dishonest influencers promote teas and pills, hiding the alterations they have there is a serious problem. Social media influencers often promote materials as a part of their affiliate marketing. They are often signed on as brand ambassadors for different brands that they work in the



field. Their main objective is to make their followers also buy the products that they are promoting. Followers can spend all their money and still not get the same promised results. They promote the product making it often seem like the solution to every problem in existence. It proves to be one of the biggest problematic aspects of influencers. They want to tell their audiences to purchase more and more products that they are advertising. These advertisements can impact impressionable minds to purchase these products.

- **Self-help tips and warnings:** Some posts on social media can illustrate the reality and vulnerability of mental illness. Unfortunately, other posts can confuse young people with self-diagnosis and advice delivered from social media users and influencers who aren't licensed healthcare professionals. Despite the benefits of destigmatizing mental health and sharing beneficial information, this kind of content also comes with risks. One critical risk is self-diagnosis. Some of these posts or videos list possible warning signs to look out for, or symptoms of a disorder, which can be helpful for education and awareness. But the issue arises when the posts encourage viewers to self-evaluate and they don't stress the importance of professional assessments. Then there's the sheer volume of content, which can quickly put children on a slippery slope. Social media platforms are designed to keep users engaged, so users are delivered content that matches their patterns. Reading a few posts or watching a few videos may not be problematic, but an hour of content about a possible diagnosis can be very misleading and convincing.

All of the above issues ultimately affect the mental health of children. They might develop short term or long-term mental health issues. Children will never be satisfied in their life with their body or family affluence. They will always try to pursue a perfect life, as they see when they watch vlogs of social media personalities. Many people believe that becoming a social media influencer is the quickest path to success and the greatest job anyone can dream of. Some young people spend all their free time making social media videos, go out of their way for eye-catching photos or invest the money they can use for something good in trendy clothes or accessories in the hope of becoming famous and signing with an agency. Instead, they should devote their energy and resources to going to school and earning a degree and working towards something more productive.



Social media can affect young people's self-esteem, confidence and mental health. Social comparisons are cognitively inefficient and require a lot of mental resources to process. Those who are solely focused on social comparisons may experience harmful effects, including decreased satisfaction with appearance, low self-esteem, higher negative mood, insecurity, and anxiety. In addition, social network users often engage in social comparisons, which can negatively impact mental health. This is especially true for influencers, as they are constantly being compared to other higher status influencers⁷³.

DANGEROUS ONLINE CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

Internet challenges can be fascinating to teens, who can be both impulsive and drawn to behavior that gets attention – especially in social media. Some social media challenges, like the ALS ice bucket challenge or the mannequin challenge, can be fun and positive activities. But other challenges that pop up on the internet are dangerous and can lead to permanent harm⁷⁴. These are some of the most dangerous social media challenges:

- The Coronavirus Challenge – Made up by an influencer highly lacking in common sense as well as basic personal hygiene. As a desperate ploy to get followers, she filmed herself licking an airplane toilet seat in what she called the "coronavirus challenge." The trend quickly spiraled into people licking other bacteria-ridden surfaces like subway poles.
- The Sunburnt Art Challenge - Admittedly, some of the "art" people have done actually looks pretty cool. The problem is that sunburns are really bad for you. For this to work, you'd have to put sunscreen only on the "drawing" and leave the rest of your skin unprotected. A sunburn or tan literally causes your DNA to burn. This makes it more likely for it to mutate as it regenerates itself, which can lead to skin cancer.
- The Full-Face Wax Challenge - People will really do anything for views, even if it means waxing their entire face. And wax is the last thing you want in your eye. Aestheticians have also expressed concern about the potential for obstructing airways, especially since the challenge usually involves putting q-tips with wax going into people's nostrils. The challenge was started by a professional barber. And while his idea wasn't great to start, it then spiraled into several unprofessionals, trying it at home. There were even some disturbing videos of children trying it. Besides skin irritation, mild burns can also happen.



- The Ice and Salt Challenge - This painful challenge is pretty simple: You put salt on your skin, then place a cube of ice on top of it. The salt causes the temperature of the ice to drop even further, burning the skin. The point is to see how long you can take the pain for. Though most people suffer a mild burn, there have been cases of obtaining third-degree burns as a result of the challenge.
- The 'Bird Box' Challenge - Sandra Bullock's post-apocalyptic movie, "Bird Box" showed the actress completing stunts like rowing a boat through rapids while blindfolded. Naturally, this inspired people to attempt everyday tasks with something over their eyes. The worst form of the challenge had people driving while blindfolded.
- The Tide Pod Challenge (Laundry detergent pods of the Tide Pods brand have been sold since 2012. Like most detergents, Tide Pods can be harmful or deadly if ingested and have been labelled as a health risk by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.) - Maybe the one of the most famous of social media challenges, the Tide pod challenge gained notoriety because of its utter ridiculousness. In late 2017, teenagers once again lowered the bar of common sense by daring each other to eat Tide pods, small laundry detergent sachets. The consumption may cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. "Dysphagia secondary to oropharyngeal and esophageal mucosal burns and ulcers" may also happen as a result of ingestion. Other impacts resulting from pod consumption include seizures, detriments to the respiratory system, and renal and electrolyte abnormalities. Laundry detergent is toxic and should never be consumed. Also, eating a large plastic satchel can cause you to choke.
- The Benadryl Challenge - Used mainly as allergy medication, Benadryl's key side effects include drowsiness. Taken in large enough quantities, though, it can cause a "high" that teens erroneously think is safe because it's a substance they're familiar with. It should go without saying that taking large amounts of any medication can cause adverse side effects. Pushing boundaries for views or likes, some teenagers have taken this challenge to the extreme. The challenge has led to hospitalizations and death from overdose.
- Car Surfing - We've seen some amazingly dumb and dangerous challenges on here, but few things compare to car surfing. For it, people ride the hood of a moving car, "surfing" it. In 2016, car surfing killed at least seven people, many of whom were 21 and under. Most people die when curves, bumps or stops throw them off the car, causing them to hit the pavement



or other things around them. Many people have also sustained serious injuries, including severe head trauma.

- The Blackout Challenge - Perhaps no social media challenge has proven as deadly as the blackout challenge, which encourages kids to suffocate themselves until they pass out. This is sometimes done by holding one's breath for prolonged periods of time, but it can sometimes include strangulation with belts that are supposed to loosen up as soon as the participant blacks out. Most injuries related to this challenge happen when participants — most of whom are underage — faint and hit themselves against objects in the room. A bad enough fall can cause a concussion or trauma serious enough to warrant going to the hospital. Cutting off oxygen to the brain can be harmful. If sustained for too long, it can even lead to a coma. Sadly, this has happened to several children, two of which have been left brain dead. At least one of them had to be taken off life support after not showing any signs of improvement. Numerous children have died because of this challenge. The parents of two have come together to sue TikTok for its irresponsible algorithm⁷⁵.
- Cinnamon challenge – A viral Internet food challenge. The objective of the challenge is to film oneself swallowing a spoonful of ground cinnamon in under 60 seconds without drinking anything, then upload the video to the Internet. The challenge is difficult and carries substantial health risks because the cinnamon coats and dries the mouth and throat, resulting in coughing, gagging, vomiting, and inhaling of cinnamon, leading to throat irritation, breathing difficulties, and risk of pneumonia or a collapsed lung.
- Fire challenge – an activity which refers to the application of flammable liquids to one's body and then setting the liquids aflame, while being video recorded. The aftermath is then posted to social media sites. Firefighters, police officers and media sources have chastised and spoken out against the activity, hoping to dissuade individuals from trying it due to its harmful nature. In 2021, a TikTok variant of this challenge involves drawing shapes on the bare skin using any flammable substance (typically alcohol) and lighting it on fire, resulting in similar consequences to the original.
- Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge – Based on trying to recreate the puffy lips of television star Kylie Jenner, Internet users show themselves using a small vessel like a shot glass that covers their lips, drawing all the air out of the vessel, and then releasing, which temporarily puffs the lips by drawing the user's blood into them. The activity is considered harmful, both from



bruising and dis-figuration of the lips, and the potential for the vessel to shatter and cut the person.

- Skull Breaker Challenge – A TikTok challenge that went viral in February 2020 and spread to other sections of the internet. The challenge involves two people convincing another person to jump, and then kick their legs out, causing the person jumping to fall on their head. Several people have been hospitalized after performing this challenge⁷⁶.
- Mukbang is a trend on YouTube where Youtubers or influencers eat enormous amounts of food. They binge eat unhealthy food. During most Mukbang, the “Mukbanger” will consume almost anything in a large amount. Although that is the typical content they do, most of them seem manage to stay in shape⁷⁷.
- The viral dieting industry, promoting dangerous messages that are carefully justified in the name of health and wellness. This includes trends like “thinspiration” and “clean eating,” which fill social media news feeds with images that in fact stigmatize weight, disordered eating, weight loss and dieting. One study that analysed 50 “fitspiration” websites found parallel messages to pro-anorexia (pro-ana) websites, both of which contain hazardous messages that support eating disorders. However, many people who follow these types of sites and associated social media platforms are unaware of the destructive influence. Other dangerous trends that are continually circulating social media include everything from the “thigh gap” to “bikini bridge” and, more recently, the “ribcage bragging”⁷⁸.
- “Body check” trends have been circulating in the past few months, with thousands of teenage girls hyper-focused on their side profiles, back profiles, jawlines, hips, waist sizes, and almost every other arbitrary attribute of their body. Body checking is the compulsive or obsessive desire to focus on a specific part of the body or the body as a whole and to seek information about it. Individuals typically resort to watching videos or looking at photos to find out information about their bodies or other bodies. Thus, these “body check” trends have been a growing concern on the platform since the content of the app shifted from being comical and satirical to being more intentional and deliberate in what it shows its audience members. And similar to other social media platforms, TikTok birthed many trends and challenges that many users partake in for views, likes and shares. However, “body check” trends can be problematic because their sole purpose is to “flex” a certain body type or feature. The



main problem with these types of TikTok is the lack of representation of different body types or physical attributes. The main participants of these body check trend you see on your FYP (“for you page”) typically have the same hourglass shape or Eurocentric facial features. All the while, these videos receive high praise and many likes for the creator’s attractiveness. Although there are many creators who attempt to challenge the norm and participate in the trend without having that “ideal body type”, the platform still communicates that these bodies are the exception and not average or normal. This creates an issue because these videos send the message that in order to be liked or noticed, you have to look, act or dress a certain way. Due to the TikTok algorithm, whether you want to or not, these types of videos will show up on a regular teen’s FYP, thus impacting many of those who struggle with body image and eating disorders. It is easy to scroll through comments of endless compliments upon the creator’s appearance and think “this is what I have to look like in order to get these same compliments”⁷⁹.

Social media rewards outrageous behavior, and the more outrageous, the bigger the bragging rights. It’s a quick moving, impulsive environment, and the fear of losing out is real for the youth. That environment plays into a teen’s underdeveloped ability to think through their actions and possible consequences⁸⁰.

GROUP 3: CONTENT RELATED RISKS

MATERIALS WITH SENSITIVE (TRAUMATIC) CONTENT

The term “sensitive media” has no one fixed or established meaning. Although what users or regulators understand as sensitive is fluid and evolves with the society’s dynamics, violent extremism, adult images/videos, and hateful content are some of the most common and conventionally understood examples of sensitive media that one should be aware of⁸¹. Whether it’s an explicit pop-up ad on a free game, videos showcasing children’s cartoon characters in adult situations, or a forum promoting self-harm, an innocent search can expose underaged youngsters to content that can make them feel upset and confused. Inappropriate content can take many forms, from inaccurate information to content that may lead your child to unlawful behavior. Children with unsupervised access to the internet can stumble across this content or it could



even be sent to them directly by another child or adult. The most common forms it could take are⁸²:

- Pornographic material;
- Content containing swearing;
- Sites that encourage vandalism, crime, terrorism, racism, eating disorders, even suicide;
- Pictures, videos or games which show images of violence or cruelty to other people or animals;
- Gambling sites;
- Unmoderated chat rooms – where there's no one supervising the conversation and barring unsuitable comments.;
- Sexism or sites that portray females in very traditional roles that do not reflect contemporary values and expectations.

The negative effects of exposure to other people's suffering have long been recognized in roles such as professional healthcare workers. Various studies have documented the negative psychological reactions following indirect exposure to traumatized people called vicarious traumatization. Social media has enabled violent stories and graphic images to be watched by the public in unedited horrific detail. Watching these events and feeling the anguish of those directly experiencing them may impact on our daily lives. Exposure to disasters in particular can trigger post-traumatic stress symptoms, such as loss of sleep, intrusive thoughts about the experience, memory impairments or severe emotional distress⁸³. Although television and other broadcasting platforms are regulated and have age restrictions, information, pictures, audios and videos on social media and the internet are poorly so. While the content we see on television is rated and usually comes with an advisory statement, content over social media websites is largely unregulated. This means that anyone can share or upload any media without any restriction while reaching out to a large number of people at the same time.

The impacts of exposure to sexual content on minors can extend to well beyond their childhoods, and ultimately can affect their relationships with other people and their own self-worth. Access to online pornography and sexual content has increased in quantity and ease due to several enabling factors, including increased use and access to the internet, increased processing power of devices, better Wi-Fi, better data roaming and inevitably the increased production and distribution of content on the internet. Today, online adult content comes in



many forms and can be found in various mediums; from videos and images to graphics, cartoons, games, audio, live streams, apps and written material. It has been observed that young people who are exposed to sexual or pornographic content at a very young age are highly likely to engage in sexual activities earlier in age. Porn depicts sexual activity in many different ways (casual, consequence-free, violent, etc.) and many are not socially normal or accepted (and potentially not legal). Someone who views this type of content may often seek out what they see, listen or observe. The exposure may cause trauma and impair the young person's social and interpersonal development. Early exposure to pornography can damage a moral compass, potentially leading people to act-out sexually against another person, commit an act of rape, molestation, or sexual violence. This exposure may cause a viewer to display varied kinds of sexual aggression against future partners. Pornography and related content will often portray unrealistic images of both genders in a sexually explicit way. Generally, one gender acts as a subordinate to the other gender. Mostly, it's men who are shown as aggressive and emotionless people, and women are portrayed as weak, naïve, and submissive.

Adult content with violence (e.g., porn, action movies, explicit imagery) can highly distort the way young people see this world. Some studies suggest that access to violent content at a young age can lead to violent behavior. This could include bullying, assaulting or fighting another child, or acting out against someone in a sexual and physically harmful way later in life. Excessive use of the internet to view adult content can have an impact on a young person's mind, and it can lead to issues and disorders such as low self-esteem, bad sleeping habits, and suicidal thoughts. Continuous use of the internet to view aggressive or explicit content may alter mental wiring in a way that they become obsessed with any sexual stimuli that they see and addicted to its access⁸⁴.

Social media allows the general population to view videos and pictures with never-before-seen levels of devastation and destruction. The world has been bombarded with pictures of the aftermath. Stretchers of wounded and possibly dying victims were on display as well as grief-stricken relatives searching through the deceased for their loved ones. As a result of watching these events and feeling the anguish of those who are directly experiencing them does have an impact on our daily activities whilst they are being broadcast, it is believed that a proportion of the population may suffer longer lasting effects such as negative stress reactions, anxiety and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). Acts of violence erode our sense of security and safety, random acts of



violence can create intense feelings of anger, frustration, fear and helplessness. Studies have shown that vicarious trauma does happen to health professionals and is defined as the transfer of violent, traumatic experiences from client/patients to a person of a helping profession⁸⁵.

Repetition of bad news and images does damage to us through vicarious trauma, much like a trauma survivor who has become hypervigilant and scans the world for danger, the dooms roller is also looking for negative events. When we're doom scrolling, our brains begin processing the world as an unsafe place, which is one of many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. It can cause us to be irritable, territorial, shut down or shut others out — and all of these are also trauma responses. Too much exposure to gloomy, hateful and bleak content can lead to the elevation of cortisol levels in the body, which will result in a downward shift in your mood. This also contributes to mental health conditions, loss of appetite, sleep issues, and increases your risk of hypertension and developing other cardiovascular disease⁸⁶.

An unfettered exposure to sensitive media triggers many unwanted and negative consequences on the mental and (potentially) physical health of the individual. Gore images, showing blood and bodily harm, can trigger distress and scar the impressionable mind of a person, especially those in the younger age brackets. Research has shown that exposure to content involving physical abuse and harm can permanently introduce a deep-rooted fear of blood and make children timid. Exposure to sensitive media can come through seemingly unarmful sources as well. Playing video games and watching television and movies are some of the potential ways to desensitize youthful minds to physical harm and assault. For example, an action film that is revered and admired by teenagers implicitly develops a liking for physical aggression which, for instance, a 15-year-old boy would then practice on someone else in the school. Similarly, popular computer games like Grand Theft Auto (GTA) and Call of Duty provide a platform where teenagers can simulate aggression and violence. Although there are no apparent immediate consequences for playing an 'exciting' computer game, it incentivizes and promotes behavior that can have real consequences in their lives e.g., getting expelled from school or college. Even in the long-term, many scientific studies have shown that such experiences accumulate over time and turn children into more psychologically unstable and hostile adults, lacking compassion and love towards fellow human beings.



Similarly, sharing posts or pictures which target one particular group of people or incites hate towards a community will contribute to an overall toxic environment. When a high-school kid reads a slur posted on Facebook against a person belonging to a community, they will subconsciously develop a disliking and apathy towards that community. Although sharing one or two controversial posts may seem harmless at one point, from a sociological perspective, it weakens the foundations of a society wherein people can tolerate and celebrate differences. It fuels hatred towards certain people, which, through many iterations, culminates into events like mass shootings. This hate speech fuels an us-vs-them mindset that implants bias in young internet users, which they then carry with themselves throughout their lives. Over the long run, this attitude inhibits friendships and learning that come through associations across different cultures. Moreover, carelessly sharing videos of forced sensitive encounters desensitizes the youth to the acts that, directly or indirectly, damage the sense of dignity of the victim and may land the user in legal troubles⁸⁷.

FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION

Fake news are news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false designed to manipulate people's perceptions of reality. They have been used to influence politics and promote advertising. But it has also become a method to stir up and intensify social conflict. Stories that are untrue and that intentionally mislead readers have caused growing mistrust. In some cases, this mistrust results in incivility, protest over imaginary events, or violence. People, organizations, and governments use fake news for two different reasons. First, they intensify social conflict to undermine people's faith in the democratic process and people's ability to work together. Second, they distract people from important issues so that these issues remain unresolved⁸⁸. Fake news is created to change people's beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions, so they will ultimately change their behavior. If you believe fake news, then someone else drives your beliefs and decisions. Also, in some parts of the world, there can be legal consequences for publishing and sharing fake news⁸⁹. There are three types of fake news:

- **Misinformation:** Some spread false information without the intent to spread harm. People spreading misinformation believe it to be true before sharing it with others;
- **Disinformation:** People may spread information to cause harm or manipulate people. Disinformation describes actual lies that people tell for money, influence or to cause disorder;



- **Malinformation:** Information that may be true but is spread with malicious intent or taken out of context. Examples include divulging private information or manipulating facts to fit a false narrative.

While some examples of fake news seem innocent or just an attempt at fun, a lot of fake news can be damaging, malicious and even dangerous. Malinformation's dangers are blatant. For example, publishing a person's private address can put them at risk of physical danger. The potential dangers of misinformation and disinformation are more subtle⁹⁰.

Since information and communication technology is so central to their lives nowadays, young people are particularly vulnerable to propaganda, misinformation and fake news. Young people spend a significant amount of their time watching television, playing online games, chatting, blogging, listening to music, posting photos of themselves and searching for other people with whom to communicate online. They rely heavily on information circulated online for their knowledge of the world and how they perceive reality⁹¹.

The structure of social media is intentionally designed to grab the user's attention with irresistible intensity. It feeds its audience content, which is repeated incessantly with the purpose of inspiring belief in the message, whether it is true or not. The idea of "flow" or maintaining the attention of the user, is particularly significant in the dissemination of political news and controversial issues⁹².

Fake news stories use technology and social media to look like proper news sites. Organizations and political groups may target you with ads that look like the news. While hackers use bots, bits of software, to create multiple social media accounts and use those to spread disinformation. This can make a false story seem real, simply because it looks like it has been shared by so many people. Fake social media posts and accounts help make misinformation viral. Sometimes this is then reported as fact by real journalists. When it becomes the news, the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. Fake news presents strong, often prejudiced opinions, as fact. It can also direct these opinions to those most likely to agree to reinforce them. This so-called "echo-chamber" effect is made worse by algorithms, clever bits of software, which encourage you to read material similar to what you are already sharing. Hackers often hack or manipulate these algorithms. Examples of fake news, promoted by hackers, politicians, trolls, ad agencies and even governments, all of whom have a good understanding of how the internet works include:



- **Fake papers (Imposter news sites)** - They look like traditional newspapers online but are not – they often showcase images and videos that have been manipulated;
- **Satire/ comedy sites** - They have no intention to cause harm but have the potential to fool people into thinking content is real;
- **Bots** - Although not an example of fake news, these are fake profiles, mainly on social media, that are created to spread fake news using automated technology;
- **Misleading content** - Articles or news stories that use fake facts to distort a particular issue or an individual;
- **Bad ads** - Ads that contain scams or false claims;
- **Headliners** - Sensationalist headlines designed to get you to spread the story without reading it;
- **Populists** - People, often politicians, willing to use fake news stories to gain popular support;
- **Deepfakes** - This is when technology is used to replicate live facial movements of a person in a video and audio to make it seem real. Some of these videos have gone viral where high-profile people like Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg have been impersonated in fake clips;
- **Hoax** - Disinformation that often spreads because of its sensational topic. It could spread through fake news stories, through videos on social media and in different ways;
- **Sock puppet accounts** - These are accounts that use fake online identities to mislead or manipulate public opinion.

Exposure to misinformation can reduce trust in the media more broadly, making it tougher to know what fact or fiction in the future is. When we start to believe that there is the possibility that anything can be fake, it's easier to discount what is actually true. This presents a real concern about the impact of fake news on our children and young people⁹³.

GROUP 4: CONTRACT RELATED RISKS

THEFT OF PERSONAL AND FINANCIAL DATA (PHISHING)

Phishing is a form of fraud in which an attacker masquerades as a reputable entity or person in email or other forms of communication. Attackers will commonly use phishing emails to distribute malicious links or attachments that can perform a variety of functions. Some will extract login credentials or account



information from victims. Deceptive phishing is popular with cybercriminals, as it is far easier to trick someone into clicking a malicious link in a seemingly legitimate phishing email than it is to break through a computer's defenses. Phishers can use public sources of information to gather background information about the victim's personal and work history, interests and activities. Typically, through social networks like LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. These sources are normally used to uncover information such as names, job titles and email addresses of potential victims. This information can then be used to craft a believable email.

A victim receives a message that appears to have been sent by a known contact or organization. The attack is then carried out either through a malicious file attachment, or through links connecting to malicious websites. In either case, the objective is to install malware on the user's device or direct the victim to a fake website. Fake websites are set up to trick victims into divulging personal and financial information, such as passwords, account IDs or credit card details. Cybercriminals continue to hone their skills in making existing phishing attacks and creating new types of phishing scams. Common types of phishing attacks include:

- ***Spear phishing attacks*** - directed at specific individuals or companies. These attacks usually employ gathered information specific to the victim to represent the message more successfully as being authentic. Spear phishing emails might include references to co-workers or executives at the victim's organization, as well as the use of the victim's name, location or other personal information;
- ***Whaling*** - type of spear phishing attack that specifically targets senior executives within an organization. This attack often carries the objective of stealing large sums. Those preparing spear phishing campaign research their victims in detail to create a more genuine message. Using information relevant or specific to a target increases the chances of the attack being successful. Because a typical whaling attack targets an employee with the ability to authorize payments, the phishing message often appears to be a command from an executive to authorize a large payment to a vendor when, in fact, the payment would be made to the attackers;
- ***Pharming*** - type of phishing attack that uses DNS cache poisoning to redirect users from a legitimate site to a fraudulent one. This is done in an



attempt to trick users into attempting to log in to the fake site with personal credentials;

- **Clone phishing** - attacks use previously delivered but legitimate emails that contain either a link or an attachment. Attackers make a copy or clone of the legitimate email and replace any number of links or attached files with malicious ones. Victims can often be tricked into clicking the malicious link or opening the malicious attachment. This technique is often used by attackers who have taken control of another victim's system. In this case, the attackers use their control of one system within an organization to email messages from a trusted sender, known to the victims;
- **The evil twin Wi-Fi attack** phishers start up a Wi-Fi access point and advertise it with a deceptive name. Normally something similar to a real-sounding access point. When victims connect to the evil twin network, the attackers gain access to all transmissions to or from victim devices. This includes access to user IDs and passwords. Attackers can also use this vector to target victim devices with their own fraudulent prompts;
- **Voice phishing** is a form of phishing that occurs over voice-based media, including voice over IP (VoIP) or plain old telephone service (POTS). A typical scam of this type uses speech synthesis software to leave voicemails notifying the victim of suspicious activity in a bank or credit account. The call will solicit the victim to respond to verify their identity -- thus compromising the victim's account credentials;
- **SMS phishing** is another mobile device-oriented phishing attack. It uses text messaging to convince victims to disclose account credentials or install malware.

ATTACKS AND SCAMS

Attacks and scams online can take different forms like:

- **Digital payment-based scams** - These happen when major payment applications and websites are used as a ruse to gain sensitive information from phishing victims. In this scam, a phisher masquerades as an online payment service (such as PayPal, Venmo or TransferWise). Generally, these attacks are performed through email, where a fake version of a trusted payment service asks a user to verify log in details and other identifying information. Usually, they claim that this is necessary in order



to resolve an issue with the user's account. Often, these phishing attempts include a link to a fraudulent "spoof" page.

- **Finance-based phishing attacks** - These are common forms of phishing, and it operates on the assumption that victims will panic into giving the scammer personal information. Usually, in these cases, the scammer poses as a bank or other financial institution. In an email or phone call, the scammer informs their potential victim that their security has been compromised. Often, scammers will use the threat of identity theft to successfully do just that. They include:
 - **Suspicious emails about money transfers** that will confuse the victim. In these phishing attempts, the potential victim receives an email that contains a receipt or rejection email regarding an AHC transfer. Often, the victim who sees this email will instantly assume fraudulent charges have been made in their account and clicks a bad link in the message. This will leave their personal data vulnerable to being mined.
 - **Direct deposit scams** are often used on new employees of a company or business. In these scams, the victims receive notice that their login information is not working. Anxious about not getting paid, the victims click a "phish" link in the email. This will lead the victim to a spoof website that installs malware to their system. From there, their banking information is vulnerable to harvesting, leading to fraudulent charges.
 - **Work-related phishing scams** - these are especially alarming, as this type of scam can be very personalized and hard to spot. In these cases, an attacker purporting to be the recipient's boss, CEO or CFO contacts the victim, and requests a wire transfer or a fake purchase.

One work-related scam that has been popping up around businesses in the last couple of years is a ploy to harvest passwords. This scam often targets executive-level employees, since they are likely not considering that an email from their boss could be a scam. The fraudulent email often works because, instead of being alarmist, it simply talks about regular workplace subjects. Usually, it informs the victim that a scheduled meeting needs to be changed. From there, the employee is asked to fill out a poll about when a good time to reschedule would be via a link. That link will then bring the victim to a spoof login page for Office 365 or Microsoft Outlook. Once they have entered your login information, the scammers steal their password⁹⁴.



GROUP 5: CROSS-CUTTING RISKS

INTERNET ADDICTION

Internet addiction, also known as internet addiction disorder, is a growing phenomenon that draws more users as new advancements in communications technology become available. Like most other addictions, the dangerous effects of internet addiction take the form of undesirable changes in a person's life and has negative physical, mental, and emotional consequences. Body aches, carpal tunnel syndrome, insomnia, vision problems, and weight gain/ loss are just some of the physical problems one may suffer as a result of an internet addiction. Emotional effects may include depression, dishonesty, anxiety, social isolation, aggression, and mood swings. Professionals that do recognize internet addiction tend to classify it as either an obsessive-compulsive disorder or an impulse control disorder to aid treatment. Internet addiction is also called compulsive computer use, pathological internet use, and internet dependence⁹⁵.

The phenomena of social media addiction can be largely attributed to the dopamine-inducing social environments that social networking sites provide. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter and Instagram produce the same neural circuitry that is caused by gambling and recreational drugs to keep consumers using their products as much as possible. Studies have shown that the constant stream of retweets, likes, and shares from these sites cause the brain's reward area to trigger the same kind of chemical reaction seen with drugs like Cocaine. In fact, neuroscientists have compared social media interaction to a syringe of dopamine being injected straight into the system.

Addictive social media use will look much like any other substance use disorder and may include mood modification (i.e., engagement in social media leads to a change in emotional states), salience (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and emotional preoccupation with social media), tolerance (i.e., ever-increasing use of social media over time), withdrawal symptoms (i.e., experiencing unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms when social media use is restricted or stopped), conflict (i.e., interpersonal problems ensue because of social media usage), and relapse (i.e., addicted individuals quickly revert back to their excessive social media usage after an abstinence period).



The reward area in the brain and its chemical messenger pathways affect decisions and sensations. When someone experiences something rewarding or uses an addictive substance, neurons in the principal dopamine-producing areas in the brain are activated and dopamine levels rise. Therefore, the brain receives a “reward” and associates the drug or activity with positive reinforcement.

This is observable in social media usage; when an individual gets a notification, such as a like or mention, the brain receives a rush of dopamine and sends it along reward pathways, causing the individual to feel pleasure. Social media provides an endless number of immediate rewards in the form of attention from others for relatively minimal effort. The brain rewires itself through this positive reinforcement, making people desire likes, retweets, and emoticon reactions.

Social media use becomes problematic when someone views social networking sites as an important coping mechanism to relieve stress, loneliness, or depression. Social media use provides these individuals with continuous rewards that they’re not receiving in real life, so they end up engaging in the activity more and more. This continuous use eventually leads to multiple interpersonal problems, such as ignoring real life relationships, work or school responsibilities, and physical health, which may then exacerbate an individual’s undesirable moods. This then causes people to engage in the social networking behavior even more as a way of relieving dysphoric mood states. When social network users repeat this cyclical pattern of relieving undesirable moods with social media use, the level of psychological dependency on social media increases⁹⁶. People who spend hours on the Internet begin to see its effects in their lives. The effects of Internet addiction gradually minimize the activities and pursuits that occupied a person's time before. The effects of internet addiction can also cause real damage to a person's mental and physical health.

In reality, addictive behavior is defined by criteria such as⁹⁷:

- Increasing tolerance levels or the need to spend more and more time online;
- Experiencing physical and emotional highs and lows when you are online and when you are offline;
- Continued use despite any detrimental effects on human life;
- A self-perpetuating cycle that reinforces itself.

More often than not, people who spend an unusually large amount of time recreationally online meet all the key criteria for addiction.



Internet addiction symptoms fall into four categories – psychological, physical, behavioral and relational⁹⁸:

A. Psychological symptoms:

- Interest in the online connection when one is engaged in other activities;
- Often experiences a negative mood (depression or anxiety) when not in front of the computer;
- A feeling of anxiety when avoiding the use of the Internet for more than a few consecutive days;
- Downplaying the negative impact of excessive Internet use;
- Losing a real sense of time when one is online. For example, a few hours at the computer seem like a few minutes;
- A sense of calm when one is online;
- Frequent feelings of guilt after spending a lot of time online;
- Experiencing feelings of frustration or tension when one is offline;
- Loss of interest and participation in hobbies or activities that were once fun and often done;
- Unsubstantiated justifications for unhealthy usage levels, e.g.: "Other people are online even more than I am".

B. Physical symptoms:

- Improper eating habits;
- Weight gain due to bad eating habits;
- Weight loss due to bad eating habits;
- Lack of physical activity;
- Headache;
- Neck pain;
- Back problems;
- Tired eyes;
- Dry eyes;
- Red eyes.

C. Behavioral symptoms:

- Regular use of the Internet until very late at night, even though one has to get up early the next morning;
- Often eating food in front of the computer;
- Neglecting important responsibilities, for example school, work, family, household tasks, because of the presence on the Internet;



- Reducing the time spent studying so that a person can be in front of the computer;
- Monitoring random internet sessions that last all day or all night;
- Making attempts to reduce internet usage with little or no success;
- You spend more and more time online and less time with other people offline;
- Showing anger towards issues related to time spent online.

D. Relational symptoms of Internet addiction:

- Making up lies related to the time spent on the Internet;
- Blaming the partner for the lack of time with the beloved;
- Relationship problems and frequent arguments stemming from partner spending too much time online;
- Losing real-world friends and gaining more and more online friends;
- Reduced time spent with family and friends;
- Decreased sex drive.

The consequences of internet addiction include:

- **Damaged Relationships** - when someone is enmeshed in online activities, they're for most part oblivious to any changes or effects of internet addiction. From the outside looking in, these changes become more and more apparent to friends and loved ones. Certain types of internet addiction in particular, such as cyber-porn, cyber-relationships and online gambling pose direct threats to the stability in a home and/or marriage. Other types of online activity, such as continuous web surfing may not pose a direct threat to close relationships but can still cause damage. In effect, the avid online user has essentially dropped-out of interactions with others. Dangerous effects of internet addiction can also take the form of replacing face-to-face interaction time with emails and texting. Ultimately, the loss of significant relationships in a person's life amounts to a loss of self-identity and connection with life⁹⁹.
- **Isolation** - spending increasing amounts of time online gradually isolates a person from friends and loved ones. The ongoing effects of internet addiction predispose a person to conditions involving depression and, in some cases, substance abuse. An ongoing lack of social interaction can have actual physical effects on a person's brain chemistry as well as physical health. As with most addictions, the longer a person "uses" the



more severe symptoms become. The effects of internet addiction can leave a person oblivious to unmet needs for social interaction. As symptoms of depression increase, the likelihood of alcohol and/or drug use increases. Add to this the overall lack of exercise a person gets and physical health starts to decline in the process¹⁰⁰.

- **Lack of sleep** - anyone can be affected by the Internet's impact on sleep. However, this issue disproportionately affects adolescents and young adults who have grown up with streaming networks, social media, video games, and other uses of the Internet as primary sources of fulfilment. Many younger individuals choose the Internet to oversleep, worsening their sleeping patterns and overall health. Additionally, because the light emitted from screens impacts melatonin production, many find it more difficult to fall asleep after heavy Internet use.
- **Impacts on Social Performance** - many individuals who lack the ability to handle social anxieties and new situations well turn to the Internet for temporary peace and detachment. The more a person avoids these situations in favor of the predictability and comfort of the Internet, the more difficult it becomes to navigate social situations. Frequent social network users believe that other users are happier and more successful than they are, especially when they do not know them very well in real life. Social media facilitates an environment in which people are comparing their realistic offline selves to the flawless, filtered, and edited online versions of others, which can be detrimental to mental well-being and perception of self. Excessive social media use can not only cause unhappiness and a general dissatisfaction with life in users but also increase the risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Constantly comparing oneself to others can lead to feelings of self-consciousness or a need for perfectionism and order, which often manifests as social anxiety disorder.
- **Work and School Performance** - internet addiction has been found to have a significant impact on students, as higher levels of Internet use typically lead to difficulty concentrating, lower grades, and worsened exam performance. Other studies have shown that many full-time workers find it difficult to control their internet use, jeopardizing their employment status and personal relationships. Not only this, but Internet addiction has also been linked to decreased job satisfaction for many employees, causing negative impacts on mental health, motivation, and other effects¹⁰¹.



- **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)** can take a toll on self-esteem and lead to compulsive checking of social media platforms to ensure that an individual isn't missing out on anything, which can cause problems in the workplace and in the classroom. Social media has a significantly detrimental effect on the emotional well-being of chronic users and their lives, negatively impacting their real-life relationships and academic achievement. The term was coined to describe young people's approach to life in general and as a major factor driving so much of their online behavior, technology use and social networking use. The FOMO phenomenon can be described as follows: constant monitoring of the social life of others gives the young person a sense of belonging. And vice versa: when a social event is missed that the young person did not attend, he feels rejected. When talking about presence in social networks, the main problem is not in the disorder of attention, but in the disorder of the identity of the person. The constant monitoring of life in social networks is an expression of a kind of neuroticism, but here there are also elements of the search for a new identity, a new belonging to another group, giving saturation of personality deficits, particularly the personality of the young person.

Young people who spend a lot of time on social networks are absent from their immediate environment and do not communicate with those closest to them, i.e. change their priorities to social contacts. Time spent on social networks is nothing, but time taken from the physical world that could be spent with others in classic, live communication. In the context of social networks, the classic form of face-to-face communication does not carry such a level of suggestibility in creating a pseudo-community, and virtual identities do not seek to replace real contact. The formation of communities or groups gives a sense of belonging and the communication of young people there creates a simulative sense of presence in a place where they feel accepted.

Social networks have various disadvantages, such as the reduction of creativity of communication, decline in the quality of work, change of identity. The main problem with social networks is much more complex and refers precisely to the transformative potential of digital technologies at the level of the human personality. Social networks create virtual identities. These virtual identities have a certain life of their own within the dynamics of social networks. In their appearance, they can largely cover the physical, real ones, but they almost always represent an imitation version, which is important to keep in life - updating statuses is as important as the very existence of the profile. Therefore,



it is not enough to have a profile: it is necessary that the profile is constantly refreshed, supplemented, dynamic and attractive. Dynamic profile maintenance is vitally important for young people, as it is an affirmation of their identity, however virtual that identity may be. The problem arises when, in the conflict between real and virtual identity, the latter prevails and the idea of reality and the ability to be present are lost. In social networks virtual profiles, it is not important who you are and what you do in the physical world, but what is the social profile and what are its dynamics.

Looking at the risks among young people in social networks, it can be said that they are addicted to their online image. Social networks have the potential to shape human identity. The connection between personalities and social profiles is best seen in the current risks among young people on social networks: when a young user posts an offensive message on a social network referring to another young person or when the virtual community marks someone's profile as undesirable. The consequences that are observed among young people start from milder mental disturbances and can reach a fatal outcome. This happens precisely because at some point they begin to build their identity on relationships in social networks.

In a social network, we don't feel as bound to the people on the other side as we do in face-to-face communication. There we feel freer to express ourselves, but the connections created do not become stronger. When communicating through a social network, we tend to trust those we have voluntarily accepted into our friends list. The information shared is franker, but this does not lead to deepening of the relationships. A dangerous attitude is to share with people who agree with our opinion, thereby deliberately depriving ourselves of living communication. At the same time, the risks of social networks are also increasing. The actions that trigger dangerous online relationships are the same ones that underlie them in real life. Only the way of their expression changes.

Most common types of internet addictions include:

- **Cybersex Addiction** - one of the more self-explanatory internet addictions. It involves online pornography, adult websites, sexual fantasy/adult chat rooms, and XXX webcam services. An obsession with any of these services can be harmful to one's ability to form real-world sexual, romantic, or intimate relationships.
- **Net Compulsions** - net compulsions concern interactive activities online that can be extremely harmful, such as online gambling, trading stocks,



online auctions (such as eBay), and compulsive online shopping. These habits can have a detrimental impact on one's financial stability and disrupt job-related duties. Spending or losing excessive amounts of money can also cause stress in one's relationships. With instant and easy access to online casinos and stores, it is easy for those who are already susceptible to a gambling or spending addiction to get hooked online.

- **Cyber (Online) Relationship Addiction** - typically online relationships are formed in chat rooms or different social networking sites but can occur anywhere one can interact with people online. Often people who pursue online relationships do so while concealing their real identity and appearance; this modern phenomenon led to the creation of the term "catfish." After being consumed by an online social life and persona, a person may be left with limited social skills and unrealistic expectations concerning in-person interactions. Many times, this leads to an inability to make real-world connections, in turn making the individual more dependent on their cyber relationships.
- **Compulsive Information Seeking** - the internet provides users with a wealth of data and knowledge. For some, the opportunity to find information so easily has turned into an uncontrollable urge to gather and organize data. In some cases, information-seeking is a manifestation of pre-existing, obsessive-compulsive tendencies. Compulsive information-seeking can also reduce work productivity and potentially lead to job termination.
- **Computer Or Gaming Addiction** - computer addiction, sometimes referred to as computer gaming addiction, involves online and offline activities that can be done with a computer. As computers became more widely available, games such as Solitaire, Tetris, and Minesweeper were programmed into their software. Researchers quickly found that obsessive computer game playing was becoming a problem in certain settings. Office employees would spend excessive amounts of time playing these games, causing a notable decrease in productivity. Not only are these classic games still available today but so are thousands of new ones, and the condition of computer gaming addiction is as prevalent and harmful as ever^{102, 103}.



ISOLATION

With such technology, you would think loneliness and its consequences would diminish. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Despite its name, researchers suspect “social” media use of increasing feelings of loneliness in large numbers of people. An internet screen is a highly personal and often isolating piece of equipment. As you sit at your desk or gaze at your phone screen, you tend to ignore the world around you.

You may have hundreds or thousands of so-called friends and followers in this world of zeros and ones. However, many, if not most of them, have never met you face to face, nor do you even know if what they’re posting is true.

After a time of existing in this world, you may realize that you substitute in-person encounters with online updates and posts to see how “friends” are getting along. Soon, you’re spending hours a day searching for meaningful contact with so-called friends and followers.

In some instances, adults and teens are already suffering from a life of loneliness or self-perceived social ineptness before engaging in unhealthy social media behavior. When this is the case, loneliness is often exacerbated by social media use, particularly in the teenage population. On the other hand, there are many cases of adults and teens who had not previously suffered from loneliness before unhealthy social media behavior, only to find themselves struggling with it later.

Unfortunately, the nature of social media makes it unhealthily attractive for many users, and they overindulge in its use. For teens who lack the maturity and skills needed to cope with loneliness and psychological stress, these toxic consequences are even more extreme than for adults¹⁰⁴.

It is common for social anxiety sufferers to open social media apps to temporarily feel some connection to others. But when they unplug, the feeling of connection dissipates. In-person human contact is known to trigger parts of our nervous system that release dopamine and oxytocin, the “happy” chemicals that help regulate our response to stress and anxiety. It also helps lower cortisol, the main stress hormone. Social media uses up time that might otherwise be spent in actual person-to-person socialization.

Other theories involve the comparisons we make between ourselves and others through their posts: For instance, seeing pictures of people at fun events can



trigger feelings of exclusion. And seeing other people's "highlight reels" can inspire feelings of jealousy. "Instead of accurately representing reality," "social media feeds are in fact highly curated by their owners. Exposure to such highly idealized representations of peers' lives may elicit feelings of envy and the distorted belief that others lead happier and more successful lives, which may increase [perceived social isolation]".

A larger circle of friends on social media doesn't mean much at all. There seems to be a cap on the number of true friends we have, no matter what our social media profiles might indicate. The authors suggest that for real friendships, there needs to be actual in-person contact to sustain it: virtual connections do not create true friendships¹⁰⁵.

FEAR OF MISSING OUT (FOMO)

There is a statistical relationship between the use of social media and social isolation. When teenagers see pictures or videos of a party where they were not invited, it can bring anxiety. It is known as "fear of missing out" or FOMO. Most of the time when they are connecting to different people using social media, they are out of the present moment and their lives. It can become a cause to feel more isolated and a reason for FOMO¹⁰⁶.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) is associated with a fear of regret, which may lead to concerns that one might miss an opportunity for social interaction, a novel experience, a memorable event, or a profitable investment. It is characterized by a desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing and can be described as the fear that deciding not to participate is the wrong choice. FOMO could result from not knowing about a conversation, missing a TV show, not attending a wedding or party, or hearing that others have discovered a new restaurant. FOMO in recent years has been attributed to a number of negative psychological and behavioral symptoms.

FOMO has increased in recent times due to advancements in technology. Social networking sites create many opportunities for FOMO. While it provides opportunities for social engagement, it offers a view into an endless stream of activities in which a person is not involved. Psychological dependence on social media can lead to this or even pathological internet use. It is also present in video games, investing, and business marketing. The increasing popularity of the phrase has led to related linguistic and cultural variants. FOMO is associated with worsening depression and anxiety, and a lowered quality of life.



Experiencing FOMO continuously throughout the semester also can lead to higher stress levels among students. An individual with an expectation to experience the fear of missing out can also develop a lower level of self-esteem. FOMO can influence the formation of long-term goals and self-perceptions. The process of relative deprivation creates FOMO and dissatisfaction. It reduces psychological well-being. That led to negative social and emotional experiences, such as boredom and loneliness. The fear of missing out derived from digital connection has been positively correlated with bad technology habits especially in youth. These negative habits included increased screen time, checking social media during school, or driving while texting. Social media use in the presence of others can be referred to as phubbing (the practice of ignoring one's companion or companions in order to pay attention to one's phone or another mobile device). Multiple studies have also identified a negative correlation between the hours of sleep and the scale at which individuals experience fear of missing out.

Social media connects individuals and showcases the lives of others at their peak. This gives people the fear of missing out when they feel like others on social media are taking part in positive life experiences that they personally are not also experiencing. This fear of missing out related to social media has symptoms including anxiety, loneliness, and a feeling of inadequacy compared to others. Self-esteem plays a key role in the levels a person feels when experiencing the fear of missing out, as their self-worth is influenced by people they observe on social media. There are two types of anxiety; one related to genetics that is permanent, and one that is temporary. The temporary state of anxiety is the one that is more relevant to the fear of missing out and is directly related to the individual looking at social media sites for a short period of time. This anxiety is caused by a loss of feeling of belonging through the concept of social exclusion. FOMO-sufferers may increasingly seek access to others' social lives and consume an escalating amount of real-time information. Social media shows just exactly what people are missing out on in real time including parties, opportunities, and other events leading for people to fear missing out on other related future events¹⁰⁷.

NEGATIVE IMPACT ON CONCENTRATION AND ATTENTION

Attention is the behavioral and cognitive process by which we selectively concentrate on a discrete aspect of information while ignoring other



information. Focusing our attention recruits brain regions such as the prefrontal and visual cortices, thalamic and midbrain nuclei. It can alternatively be thought of as an allocation of limited cognitive processing resources to a particular topic or task. The ability to achieve selective and sustained attention, free from distractions, is critical to our ability to complete tasks, learn new information, and engage socially with others. Once attention is engaged, we remain focused until some external environmental or internal state change occurs that triggers a shift. The constant flow of information and notifications the internet brings may interfere with our ability to maintain sustained concentration on other tasks. Social media is designed to be highly engaging in an attempt to keep us browsing for as long as possible. Furthermore, content that fails to gain our attention is quickly drowned out in a sea of incoming information, while information that does capture our attention is amplified or proliferated¹⁰⁸. Attention span is the amount of time spent focused on a task before becoming distracted. Distractibility occurs when attention is irrepressibly diverted to another activity or sensation. Most educators and psychologists agree that the ability to focus and sustain attention is critical for a person to achieve their goals. Attention training is said to be part of education, particularly in the way students are skilled to remain focused on a topic of observation or discussion for extended periods, developing listening and analytical skills in the process. Many working professionals suffer from attention discrepancies; a number of physical and mental health issues can contribute to abbreviated attention spans, including poor diet, lack of exercise, and conditions such as depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Attention is critical for working memory; if we aren't paying attention, those digits won't register in the first place. Emotional intelligence requires self-awareness – awareness of our own minds and emotions as well as empathy, both of which can be cultivated by honing our skills of attention.

A lesser attention span can have several negative effects, including:

- Poor performance at work or school;
- Missing significant details or information;
- Communication difficulties in relationships;
- Data wouldn't emerge as knowledge, as the data is being bombarded haphazardly;
- Empathy and the kindness it spark are essential human traits. Decrease in attention span decreases empathy;
- Big picture is lost, and easily carried out by propaganda¹⁰⁹.



A study by Microsoft revealed that the average person now starts to lose attention after a mere eight seconds. Social media's impact on attention and focus has long been debated. It's now well-established that social media consumes or exhausts attention resources and detracts attention from other more important life activities like work, education, and personal development. Not only are attention spans dwindling, but many users are multitasking while consuming social media, which leads to further decreased attention on each task¹¹⁰.

We now have so much information available for us to consume, and so little time to consume it in. It has become very clear that the size of the allotted attention time in our collective brains cannot keep up with the amount of information competing for that attention. Because of this, we've basically trained ourselves to focus on things for very short bursts of time before moving on to the next thing.

It has been found that high levels of internet use can impact many different functions of the brain. For instance, the limitless prompts and streams of notifications on the web encourage us to constantly hold divided attention¹¹¹. Social media is a major source of distraction and thus can hinder users from successfully fulfilling certain tasks by tempting them to use social media instead. Distractions are caused by task-irrelevant stimuli that interrupt goal-directed behavior. Such distractions should be ignored when people want to focus on a task that requires their undivided attention to fulfil a certain goal. For instance, when writing a paper or talking to someone, social media cues – as the irrelevant distractors in that situation are distracting by drawing the attention away from the primary task¹¹².

TikTok, for example, calls upon users to scroll through unrelated videos from different creators, which range anywhere from 15 seconds to three minutes long. In the same regard, Instagram is designed for users to endlessly scroll through countless posts from their friends, family, celebrities and strangers. Both of these apps are formatted in a way that inhibits users from truly taking the time to process information, thereby encouraging mindless and rapid consumption of social media.

Snapchat is another prime example of an app that has taken full advantage of users' shortened attention spans. By design, Snapchat users can only view content for a certain number of seconds, catering to individuals' inability to stay



focused for longer periods. Snapchat's success can largely be attributed to the fact that the app has been curated to serve users with an inability to truly pay attention for longer than a few seconds.

Regular consumers of social media are unwittingly trained to seek instant gratification from scrolling through videos and pictures and responding to messages. In the long run, this behavior diminishes social media users' ability to pay attention for longer periods of time, and users often struggle to pay attention to anything that does not provide immediate excitement and gratification¹¹³.

NEGATIVE IMPACT ON SELF-ESTEEM AND WORTH

We all have a natural tendency to compare ourselves to others, whether intentionally or not, online or offline. Such comparisons help us evaluate our own achievements, skills, personality and our emotions. This, in turn, influences how we see ourselves. But what impact do these comparisons have on our well-being? It depends on how much comparing we do. Beyond or below the optimal level of perceived difference between oneself and another, a person no longer makes any effort. By perceiving oneself as inferior, the individual will experience negative emotions, guilt and lowered pride and self-esteem¹¹⁴.

When you already feel as though your life is lacking, social media only serves to amplify what other people have and what's going well for them. After all, many people use their social media profiles to project a perfect image with carefully chosen photos, often showcasing different filters. It can also add stress to your daily life, especially when it comes to evaluating your own posts. Each time you post a picture or status update, you might worry about the number of likes, shares, and comments your post will generate. This obsession to be seen offers another opportunity for comparison, as you might wonder why another person's images or content got more attention and positive feedback than yours¹¹⁵.

Another reason why the problem is associated with social media might be what psychologists call displacement, which means what young people are not doing during time that's displaced by social media. This includes mental health and self-esteem boosting activities such as exercise, sleep and developing talents. If you're spending a lot of time on your phone, you have less time for activities that can build confidence, a sense of achievement and connectedness. You get a little dopamine burst whenever you get a notification, or a like on a picture, or a follow request. But those things are addicting without being satisfying. People are



worried about how many “likes” they can get, how many followers they gain and how many retweets they have, even though none of it matters for their development¹¹⁶.

Likes and comments are signs of validation. The more likes we get, the better we tend to feel. But when this happens, we place the value of others’ opinions above our own. Letting other people determine your self-worth is a surefire way to destruct self-confidence and feel less-than-adequate. ‘What if no one likes it or comments?’ A lot of time can be spent thinking about what to post and how. Questions we can often ask are: ‘Will this look stupid?’, ‘Will people make fun of me?’ and, ‘Is this picture posting worthy?’ You can get into comparing and ask yourself: ‘Why did their post get so many more likes than mine?’ People compare how many birthday greetings they got, how many friends they have, how many people post to their page or tag them in a post. A friend posts on another friend’s wall and you wonder ‘Why didn’t they tag me?’ or ‘Why didn’t they post that on my wall?’¹¹⁷.

The fallout from these unrealistic standards becomes more dangerous once kids reach colleges or universities, where they face higher stakes, harder work, and a largely parent-free environment. The pressure to look perfect to impress new peers, not to speak of friends and family back home, can be even greater. After a recent spate of college suicides, researchers at Stanford University coined the phrase “duck syndrome.” The term refers to the way a duck appears to glide effortlessly across a pond while below the surface its feet work frantically, invisibly struggling to stay afloat. Several students who have died had projected a perfect image on social media with their feeds packed with inspirational quotes and filtered images showing attractive, happy kids who seemed to excel with minimal effort. But behind the digital curtain they were struggling emotionally. Adolescents who have created idealized online personas may feel frustrated and depressed at the gap between who they pretend to be online and who they truly are. If you practice being a false-self eight hours a day, it gets harder to accept the less-than-perfect-being you really are and as we all know there’s no harsher judge than oneself¹¹⁸.

DISTORTION OF THE VALUE SYSTEM

Political scientists refer to the term “public sphere” as the arena in which individuals come together to share issues of importance, exchanging opinions through discussion and deliberation. It is within the public sphere that society



develops an understanding of ourselves – our collective wisdom. The public sphere of course does not represent a singular view. It encompasses the whole spectrum of views, spanning a range of cultural and political perspectives from mainstream to fringe. That spectrum represents our common reality. It embodies our collective sense of what views and values our society holds at each level, from the hyperlocal to the more distant. By forming an accurate model of society, we the people can make good decisions about our future.

Social media has distorted the public sphere beyond recognition. Each of us now has a deeply flawed mental model of our own communities. This damages our collective wisdom, but it is not the content itself that is most responsible. We must instead blame the machinery of distribution. But social media has inserted itself between each of us and our daily experiences, moderating and manipulating the information we receive about our society. The platforms do this by profiling us over time and using those profiles to target us with selective content – custom curated news, ads, and posts that do not represent our society as a whole. And this happens without us fully realizing it.

As a result, we all feel like we are experiencing the public sphere every day, when really each of us is trapped in a distorted representation of the world. This causes us to incorrectly generalize our world and build flawed mental models of our own society. Thus, social media degrades our collective intelligence and damages our ability to make good decisions about our future.

The warped public sphere we each inhabit is not random. It is custom curated to target us with the information that will most likely resonate. This gives most of us an overinflated impression of the prevalence of our own views and values, and an underdeveloped sense of the prevalence of conflicting views and values. This dynamic amplifies extreme perspectives and drives polarization, but even worse, it destroys our collective wisdom as a society.

Media has the power to influence individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, social norms that influence and encourage gender violence have been targeted by policy interventions using mass media communication. Prior research suggests that media influences through two effects: the individual or direct effect (private) or the social or indirect effect (public). In the individual effect, media information about new norms may persuade individuals to accept them. In the social effect, the information creates common knowledge of a norm



and enhances social coordination as individuals more readily accept the information if they believe others have also accepted it¹¹⁹.

Values are principles mainly of a moral nature, which are goals and ideals and determine the actions of people. They are abstract and guide human life, and on a daily level they are translated into a system of norms.

New digital technologies have a major impact not only on everyday life, but also on social relations, education, religion, family, government, commerce, economics, production and dissemination of knowledge, and on us as individuals. The Internet and virtual communities provide new opportunities not only for communication, but also for self-presentation of individuals as individuals. Online social networks are also platforms for self-presentation. They are a new kind of stage with unlimited possibilities, influencing not only the personality, but also every aspect of it, including values. They are the expression of what we consider important in our lives, give us purpose and determine our actions and our interactions with others. They are environments with their own norms and values, but together with them they give a new field for the values of the offline environment or the "real" world. Social networks give publicity to social values, making known to the general public not only our personality, but also our values, as social beings, living society, whose values we have adopted and refracted through our identity.

Social networks create multiple virtual communities, with each individual being part of these communities in which they demonstrate different traits and characteristics of their personality and try out different possible versions. To be recognized as a person, one must be accepted and be part of a given group and, accordingly, a community. And in order to be part of a given community, one must share its norms and values. When we think about our values, we think about the things that are important to us. Each individual's life is different, and individual characteristics of lifestyle affect individuals' values.

For example, people with children must avoid risky situations, which limits the pursuit of stimulating values. In social networks, such restrictions do not exist. Individuals in virtual communities and social networks in general transfer values from the offline environment to the virtual world. This does not mean that social networks do not have their own norms and values that are unique to them and are absent in the offline environment. It is they who give individuals the opportunity to "play" with their identity, having the opportunity and "courage"



to try out different possibilities of it. Values, as we have already mentioned, are cultural products that people living in a given society earn as "prizes", as they are of great importance. As a result, they are a goal pursued by individuals. In social networks, the main values are related to building and maintaining profiles, sharing personal information, interests, writing statuses, chatting or commenting on other people's content¹²⁰.

There is a clear link between social media use and narcissism. What's more, the use of social media impacts social decision-making negatively and erodes empathy by desensitizing. We can present ourselves as new and unique on social media. Younger people are particularly at risk because they see the possibility of becoming Instagram or TikTok stars as very real. It seems so easy. In reality, one in a million users becomes a famous influencer.

A study on Canadian college students that explored social media use habits included a question on what they found to be of paramount importance in their lives. Researchers found social media use frequency was directly proportional to answers like "having fun" and "looking good." Those who didn't use media as often shared they were more concerned with "being honest" or "helping others".

While we can't blame social media for value erosion, we can't discount their impact. There are many other factors at play. For example, people with poorer value system tend to be more attracted to social media. The strength of the relationship between social media use and value erosion is startling. There can be bad impacts on all kinds of people with all kinds of values, especially young people since they are more susceptible.

Pictures have visual primacy, making them more impactful than a status update or tweet. If a photo accumulates enough likes, it becomes more credible. We begin to perceive it as reliable and truthful. What's more, people are prone to think something is true or normal until proven otherwise. The more we're exposed to something, the more standard it seems. It can challenge or even change what we value. Seeing numerous photos of underage people drinking alcohol and enjoying themselves undermines the idea that underage drinking is dangerous. You do not see the results – the hangover, the car crash, etc. Social media mislead people into believing the beautiful and exciting things they see are the reality and not just a small part of it. An image fails to capture the ups and downs of day-to-day life. An image on social media creates the illusion of a



definite beginning, middle, and end to something. In most cases, it's just a fake moment in time. This idea of "normalcy" can trap young adults who need attention to feel validated¹²¹.

Disjointed communication and lack of eye-contact on social media make it easy to overcome personal distress for others, suggesting that emotions such as guilt and shame do not occur. This is problematic because such emotions are critical when it comes to internalizing empathy for others and preventing the violation of social norms. When people feel personal distress over hurting another person, they learn the consequences of their actions and feel motivated to change their behavior and conform to norms. Social media removes the process that facilitates these feelings of shame and guilt, making it harder to empathize with others and learn social norms aimed at being respectful and kind to others. This may explain why violent videos, trolling, flaming, and ranting all continue to occur on social media.

In summary, large social media networks, one-to-many communication, immediate access to social media, disjointed communication, and lack of eye contact on social media can lead to issues such as over-sharing, self-interested behavior, poor emotional regulation, and lower empathy. These outcomes make it easier to perform harmful behaviors. The pervasiveness of harmful behaviors on social media sites means that their presence is reinforced through social learning. Inconsistency in enforcing the community standards that remove harmful content from social media also supports the message that this behavior is acceptable online. These processes make it more difficult to establish wide-reaching social norms that would normally keep this behavior from occurring online and offline.

In addition, perceived anonymity leads to the bystander effect, which impacts platform's ability to discover and respond to community standards violations. According to the bystander effect, the more people that observe an emergency, the less likely any one person will take action to stop it. This is because feelings of responsibility to intervene are diffused away from the individual and onto others in the crowd. In this way, perceived anonymity can lead to reductions in reporting by bystanders seeing harmful content online. Since the burden of enforcement of community standards falls almost entirely on user reports, harmful content continues to live on social media. Without consistent reporting and enforcement of community standards by platforms, social norms become ambiguous and hard to follow.



The unique characteristics of social media-based communication mixed with perceived anonymity creates an environment that supports over-sharing, self-interested behavior, low impulse control, and low empathy behavior. This is especially problematic when large agreement centered social media groups surround themselves with harmful values that users conform to without fear of sanctions from platforms that do not enforce community standards consistently. The structure of social media facilitates an environment where harmful content is maintained and reinforced, as well as a space where reporting is less likely to occur. Yet, platforms continue to depend exclusively on user reports in order to discover harmful content¹²².

DAMAGING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

The ability to think critically can determine whether an individual's behavior is ethical or not. In other words, critical thinking is closely related to ethics and values. Critical thinking refers to the activity of analyzing ideas or thoughts in a more specific direction, sharply distinguishing them, selecting, identifying, studying and developing them in a more perfect direction. Critical thinking is related to a person's ability to analyse a topic, information, ideas or thoughts and knowledge, done objectively, logically, reflectively, organized, systematically and productively, to form understanding, belief and reasoning in evaluation and decision-making that is a problem-solving oriented tool.

The ability to think independently or express an unpopular opinion may be unacceptable to others. It is the questioning and critical thinking abilities of young people. The root of the problem with the critical thinking of young people is important, and the answer is in social networks. Information published by influencers, for example, and ordinary users present a different reality. Social networks not only influence the opinions of their users, but also dull the ability to think critically and form one's own views.

The existence of algorithms applied by social networks allow them to decide what content to show and what the user wants to see. Social networks have a huge influence on youth as they can have an impact on personality development. We do not realize that the personality of many young people is shaped by moral positions, ideology and opinions that social networks sell to them. Social networks impose opinion, are capable of spreading false information and influence the opinions of the average user. Young people are the most vulnerable and susceptible to being drawn into or occupying popular positions.



People are increasingly used to watching, reading and listening only to what they want or are interested in. They get annoyed when they hear different opinions and seem to want to bring the social network algorithm to real life. Social network algorithms seem to have infiltrated real life. Addiction to social networks among young people is increasing¹²³.

Exposure to inappropriate content can lead youth to extremes such as self-harm, disruptive and violent behavior. Exposure to such content may also lead to discriminatory ideas. Imparting inaccurate or incomplete information limits young people's understanding of the world around them. The tendency to personalize content based on user behavior can lead to 'filter bubbles' which limit children from developing and accessing a wide range of content. It has been found that many children do not respect the age restrictions placed on the websites. Exposure to content that is algorithmically filtered with the intent to manipulate can significantly impact youth development, opinions, values and habits. Isolating them in 'echo chambers' or 'filter bubbles' prevents them from accessing a wide variety of opinions and ideas.



8. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the similarities, social life online is different in many ways from offline (i.e., lack of face-to-face interaction, overcoming geographic restrictions, etc.). We remain the same people whether we are online or offline. And values represent beliefs of both a person and a social group in which an emotional investment is made (for or against something). Each value (e.g., truth and/ or freedom) is part of an underlying value system that determines an individual's actions or reactions. We want to find desirable jobs and romantic partners, this means we must be able to cooperate and coordinate with others to successfully complete a task, we like to share personal news, sympathize and celebrate with our friends, we worry about our status in our social groups, etc. Social networks are a medium that gives publicity to social values, making known to the public our essence as individuals and our values, as social beings living in a society whose values we have adopted and refracted through our identity¹²⁴. Social networks give publicity to social values, making known to the public not only our personality, but also our values, as social beings living in a society whose values we have adopted and refracted through our identity. This is why social networks may have both positive and negative effect on young people.

Positive effect of social networks includes¹²⁵:

- **Maintaining mental health:** Many organizations and websites now offer support through social networks for those suffering from mental health problems. In this way, they raise awareness and bring people together to share experiences. Studies found that patients with severe mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, used social networks to feel less alone. In addition, many sites allow people to sign up to receive texts that provide inspiration, positive messages, and recovery resources.
- **Positive inspiration:** social media can have a positive impact by creating peer motivation – inspiring young people to develop healthy habits, learn new skills, follow their dreams and talk about things that matter to them. Teens can find positive role models online. In addition, a wide variety of apps offer instruction and support for developing a more positive outlook and building healthy habits, such as meditation and exercise.
- **Connecting:** Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat help teenagers stay connected and give them a sense of belonging and acceptance. This is especially true for young people who feel isolated or marginalized, such as LGBTQ youth and those struggling with mental health issues.



- **Claiming identity and position:** Young people who express their opinions on social networks experience increased well-being. As a result of forming and expressing their opinions, they develop self-awareness and self-knowledge. This is helpful for the maturation process and contributes to strong self-esteem.
- **Maintaining good health:** Another positive side of social networks is that mental health experts can use them to collect data that can then inform needed and upcoming research. Therapists, for example, can network with each other in online communities, thereby expanding their knowledge and reach.
- **Online therapy:** Licensed clinical professionals are now providing therapy services through online platforms. They are therefore able to reach young people who would otherwise not have access to mental health treatment. Additionally, online therapy allows teenagers and young adults to continue recovery after leaving an inpatient treatment or outpatient program.

The negative effect of social networks manifests itself in uncontrolled and excessive time on social media that can lead to any of the following negative aspects¹²⁶:

- **Decreased outdoor time** resulting from increased screen time, depriving youth of the mental health benefits and positive influence of nature;
- **Less physical activity**, which means young people are prone to obesity and poor health;
- **Poor body image and low self-esteem** because of social comparison;
- **Addiction to social networks**, smartphones and/ or video games, causing the brain to react to digital interaction in the same way as to drugs;
- **Social networks risk exposure** – social media enable cyberbullying and other threatening online social interactions with peers;
- **Social isolation** & lack of face-to-face social contact and communication, resulting in impaired social skills & less satisfying relationships in real life;
- **Insufficient sleep** due to the use of social networks. This is an important issue because sleep deprivation can cause or contribute to depressive symptoms.
- **Personal development problems, distortion of young people's values** etc.



Insufficient attention to the problem of the use of social networks by young people has impact on their social life, psychosomatic impact, overall well-being, market-relevant purchase and consumption behavior, including communication outside social platforms. A proper examination of the characteristics and degree of influence at the individual level must be a part of the study of the risks of social networks. There is a need to research the degree of influence of risks, online and offline behavior, individuality, tastes and characteristics of youth. The influence of social networks and the subsequent risk for young people has an impact on their social behavior. They become dependent on their media status, on other people's approval, and this has a negative impact on their ability to make independent decisions and on their relationships with others.

A proper definition of risks, associated with social networks could be the base for building and implementing effective policies and measures, which would have several positive effects:

- improved skills of young people to deal with social media risks;
- increased media literacy skills to know what misinformation and fake news is and what is not;
- ability to avoid dangerous encounters with strangers;
- improved interpersonal skills as well as social inclusion.



IV. RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS – EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter is presented current empirical data about risks, associated with social networks amongst young people from different countries – those, partners in the project and other countries from all continents.

Statistical data and results from recent surveys about the risks in social media amongst young people in different countries are collected and processed. They are presented in a concise form and are derived from online sources like:

- Official national institutions with interest in children’s health and wellbeing – ministries, government agencies, etc.;
- Scientific research published online;
- Projects, related to children’s safety online;
- Educational materials about social media;
- Critical media reviews.

The time of publications in focus includes last 10 years – between 2015 and 2024 to monitor and analyze most present information and also to observe trends in each of the countries.

A. PARTNERING COUNTRIES

Partnering countries in this project are:

1. Bulgaria
2. North Macedonia
3. Poland
4. Austria

Below data about each country is presented and discussed. In the next chapter data from the survey, conducted in each country is presented.

1. BULGARIA

Online Conduct of Children in Bulgaria survey 2016¹²⁷

In September 2016, the Applied Research and Communication Fund, coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre in cooperation with the MarketLinks agency conducted a national representative survey titled "Online Conduct of Children in Bulgaria". The survey, which is a part of the larger European-wide research "EU Kids Online 2016-2017" examined how children and young people engage with the internet and digital technologies in their everyday lives. A total of 1000 children and 1000 parents were interviewed across Bulgaria. The survey revealed that almost all (97%) Bulgarian children aged 9-17 use internet. This is a considerable increase compared to 2008, when (according to the Flash Eurobarometer survey) 81% of children in the country used the Web. The number of internet users among the parents is also very high, with 70% declaring that they are online every day (11.2% never and 8.4% rarely use internet). If we compare this numbers with the data of the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute, which show that in 2015 only 59.1% of households had internet access, it can be concluded that presence of children in the family notably increases the likelihood of internet connection in the home. The age at which children go online is steadily decreasing, with some children starting as early as 4 (3%) or 5 (6.8%). Almost a quarter (24.3%) had their first contact with the Web at the age of 7, while almost 90% became internet users before they turned 11. The average age of the first use is 8, while in 2010, it was 9.

Table 3. How often do you use internet?

	2016	2010
Every day or almost every day	93.4%	83%
Once or twice a week	4.3%	16%
Once or twice a month	0.7%	1%
Less often	1.2%	0%

More than half of the children from the sample engage in the following online activities practically every day: watch video clips, use social networks, listen to music and/or play games. Between 30 and 40% publish pictures or texts, use internet for communication with family and friends, watch TV or films, or look for information. Only 22% of children use the Web for activities connected with school and education on daily basis. The question about their personal experiences revealed that over the past one year one out of every 7 children encountered something that made them feel uncomfortable, scared or



embarrassed. Comparison with the previous survey shows a negative tendency, as in 2010 this was the case with one in ten children. The likelihood of an unpleasant internet occurrence increases with the age. The use of social networks is the second most widespread online activity of Bulgarian children (after watching videos), although the share of children, who are not regular social media users is also quite high (23% said that they have not used social media at all during the last month).

Facebook is the most popular social network (frequently used by 71.7% of respondents). Other widely used social platforms are Messenger (used by 53.6%), Viber (50.1%) and Instagram (29.9%). Snapchat (used by 16.2% of respondents), WhatsApp (11.9%), Ask.fm (4.9) and Omegle (2.1%) are less popular. In 2010, 54% of Bulgarian kids had a profile in at least one social network, which was somewhat below the average for the 25 countries from the survey (59%). This has changed dramatically, as now 86.6% of participating children are social networks users, albeit some are more regular than others. The share of social network users increased immensely also in two other age groups. There are hardly any Bulgarian youths over 15 years of age that do not have at least one social profile. While the widespread use of social networks is not a cause for concern by itself, the fact that one third of all children keep their social profiles public and thus accessible to people they do not know, carries a considerable risk.

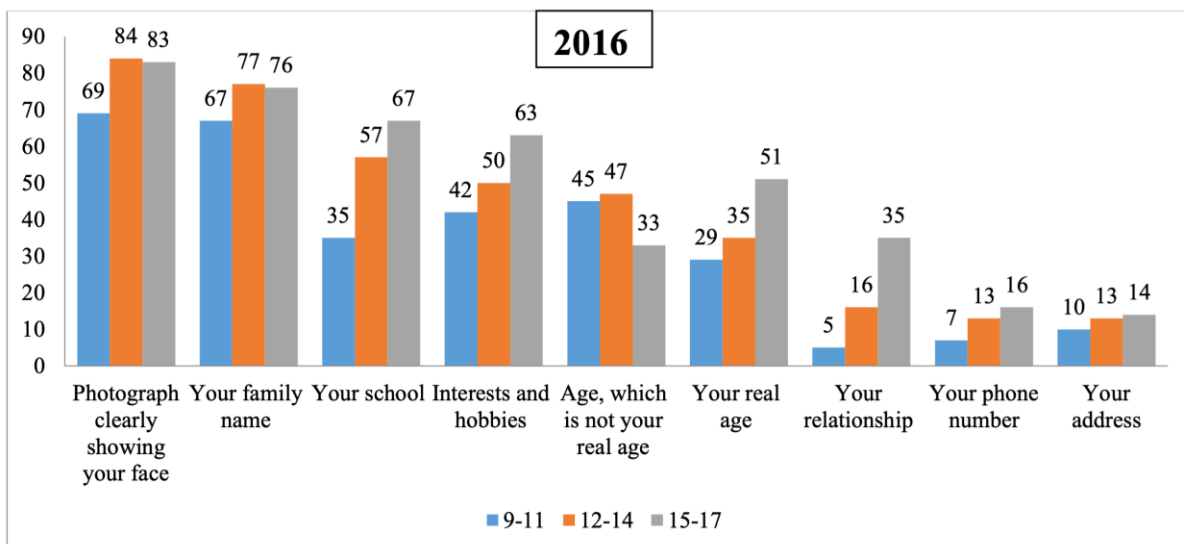


Figure 12. Is the following information shown on your Facebook profile? (% of children with a Facebook account, who answered 'yes')



Not surprisingly, the older the children are, the more likely it is that they would share personal information on their profiles. On the one hand, they are more self-confident and less shy about revealing themselves to the online community, and on the other, their parents mediate and interfere less. The older the children get, the less cautious they become. Almost 45% of children in age group 15-17 admit to befriending people they have never met in person. The survey conducted in 2010 returned similar results: 12.7% of children aged 9-11, 36.4% of those aged 12-14, and 49.8% of 15–16-year-olds have added people they have never met face-to-face to their friends' lists or address books. According to the practice of the Safer Internet Centre, children aged 12-16 are most often targeted by pedophiles using Facebook to establish contact with children. The survey shows that about 20% of children and youngsters went to an offline meeting with someone they communicated with online and who they have never met face-to-face before. This is a considerable increase from 8% in 2010. For most of them, this was a pleasant event, while less than 6% reported an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. The age group 15-17 sticks out again. They are not only eager to make new online friends - at this age youngsters are also quite prone to meet their new virtual friends in person. This is something 4 out of 10 did at least once during the past year.

Around 15 % of children admit that they have insulted, abused or bullied others. This is a rather standard and expected result, as children and young people are usually less inclined to admit that they have behaved in such a way. Again, the face-to-face abuse/bullying occurred twice more often compared to online abuse (75.2% compared to 34.6%).

Table 4. During the last year, have you seen Internet pages or

	No		Yes		I do not want to answer	
	2016	2010	2016	2010	2016	2010
Ways how to physically hurt yourself	80.2%	86.5%	17.8%	7.5%	2.0%	5.9%
Ways how to commit suicide	86.9%	90.7%	11.4%	4.8%	1.7%	4.5%
Ways how to rapidly lose weight	71.8%	74.7%	26.1%	19.3%	2.1%	6.0%
Hate speech attacking certain groups or persons (e.g. people of different skin colour, religion or nationality)	70.8%	72.4%	26.9%	19.8%	2.3%	7.8%
Use of narcotics	78.5%	85.4%	18.8%	7.5%	2.7%	7.1%
Images with blood and violence (e.g. killings and executions)	72.4%	N/A	25.3%	N/A	2.3%	N/A



About 105 children (46 boys and 59 girls) from the sample said that over the past year, they received messages containing sexual pictures, videos or text. For about half of them (53.3%), this was incidental - it only happened once or twice. One third of these children said that they receive sexual messages regularly (18% at least once per month, 10.5% at least once a week, and 3% every day). The remaining 15 percent preferred not to answer. For every second child this was unpleasant experience.

Global Kids Online Bulgaria survey 2017¹²⁸

New findings from Global Kids Online Bulgaria, launched by the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre, revealed that children are spending more time online at increasingly younger ages. Even though many of them are technically competent and skilled internet users, few children take full advantage of the online opportunities or act in a proactive way.

The average age of accessing the internet for the first time in Bulgaria has dropped to 8 years old over the past 6 years and by the time children reach 10 years old, 90% are already online. Children also go online more often and spend more time using the internet than they did 6 years ago. Over 9 in 10 children (93%) use the internet daily and the majority of these children (79%) spend at least one hour online.

Children in Bulgaria go online predominantly via a smartphone (80%), which creates not only opportunities but also risks due to relatively unsupervised access. More internet access comes with higher exposure to online risk and the safety of children when they are online depends on their digital skills. Better skills also allow children to take more advantage of the opportunities that the internet affords them.

About 70% of Bulgarian children report that they learn new things from the Internet every week and almost all of them (96%) agrees that the internet offers a lot of useful things for children of their age. About half children use the internet for schoolwork (51%) and to look for news online (45%) but looking for health information is rare, even among older teenagers. In fact, children in Bulgaria use the internet most often for leisure and entertainment activities, such as watching videos (89%), listening to music (86%), and visiting social networking sites (73%). Playing games and posting pictures and comments are also popular.

While children in Bulgaria use the internet to create content rather rarely, they seem competent internet users. Most know how to save a photo they found



online (86%), find it easy to choose terms for their online searches (78%), or how to install an app (77%) and check mobile app prices (67%). They are also able to access their information from various devices they use (70%) and know how to change the privacy settings of their online profiles (73%).

However, having the skills does not translate into making use of the existing opportunities. For example, while nearly 80% of children know how to record and upload a video online, only 23% have done so in the past month. While the internet is a popular place for socializing with friends, very few children use it for civic participation. Most of the children do not engage online with local charities or organizations (7%), campaigns or protests (4%) or in discussing political or social problems with others (6%). Similarly, using the internet for school preparation is considered highly useful (the second most useful online activity after using the internet to play games), but is the 12th most frequent online activity they actually engage in – only 50% of children use the internet for schoolwork at least once a week and nearly a quarter (24%) have not used done so over the past month.

The increased use of the internet, however, has created more exposure to risk, especially for older children. Over the past year 15% of children in Bulgaria have experienced something online that bothered or upset them compared to 9% in 2010. About one third of all survey participants have seen online pornographic content, which was upsetting for almost half of these children. A third of the children have encountered online hate speech or seen violent online materials, including images and videos of murders and executions, which was exceptionally or very upsetting for nearly half of the children.

Most children talk to family and friends when they experience something negative online but nearly one in 5 children do not speak to anybody. Parents and carers are the main source of support (70% of children turn to them), followed by friends (36%) and siblings (12%). Teachers or other professionals are very rarely sought for support in such cases (respectively 4% and 1%). In addition, a significant number of children (18%) do not talk to anybody and this proportion has increased considerably since 2010 (4%). When to cope with upsetting content, the most common strategies are closing the unpleasant, disturbing or unwanted website or application (44%), ignoring the problem (32%), blocking the person (28%) or deleting the messages (14%). Very few children report the incident (5%).

Georgi Apostolov, the coordinator of the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre which carried out the survey summarized the challenges: “Today’s 9-17 years old



Bulgarian children are real digital natives. Most of them use internet and mobile communications almost all the time and often have digital skills superior to those of their parents. This is probably the main reason why parents seem to have reduced the supervision and mediation compared to 6 years ago. However, children start using internet at an earlier age, so they need more mediation in order to develop the necessary social and media skills that will allow them to benefit from the opportunities the internet provides. The education system also has an important role to play – digital and media literacy should be urgently included in the curricula in order to educate competent and active netizens”.

European School Projects for Alcohol and Drugs study 2019¹²⁹

Bulgaria is among the countries with the highest rate of social media use by youths, with six hours or more per day, according to ESPAD, the European School Projects for Alcohol and Drugs. The findings of the study were made public in Bulgaria by psychologist Anina Chileva, a lead ESPAD researcher at the National Centre for Public Health and Analysis. The study was carried out in 2019 in 35 European countries among 99,647 students aged 15 and 16, including 2,800 in Bulgaria.

Social media: Some 94 per cent of respondents reported having used the social media in the past week. They spent an average of 2-3 hours there on a school day and 6 or more hours on non-school days. In most countries, girls use the social media more than boys. In Bulgaria, 47 per cent of the girls and 27 per cent of the boys use social media 6 or more than 6 hours on non-school days. Only Malta beats Bulgaria with 47 and 34 per cent, respectively. Bulgaria is also among the countries with the biggest relative share of students who don't use social media: 15 per cent on school days and 10 per cent on non-school days. Europe-wide, an average of 6.4 per cent of youths never used social media in the past school week and 4.4 per cent never used it on non-school days. The question remains whether not using social media is a conscious choice or due to limited access to the social media. As far as gaming is concerned, 60 per cent of respondents report playing online games on school days in the last month and 69 per cent on non-school days. Bulgaria has the largest relative share (22 per cent) of those who play 6 or more hours per day on non-school days. In most countries, boys spend twice as much time as girls playing online games. There is an obvious reason. In her words, girls are more social and better communicators while boys are not competitive and good at setting themselves goals which require victory. In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in Europe, youths see the time spent in



social media as more of a problem than gaming. 46 per cent of youths in Europe and 50 per cent in Bulgaria believe that the amount of time spent in social media is a problem. 21 per cent in Europe and 29 per cent in Bulgaria say that the time spent playing digital games is a problem.

Center for the Study of Democracy study 2020

Young people and extreme content on social networks: there is another way¹³⁰

Data from a nationally representative survey in Bulgaria of 1,018 youth ages 14-19 shows that the age at which children first encounter the digital environment and become active users in the Internet space is decreasing. Although family and friends have the greatest influence in forming young people's opinion on important social topics, many of them also turn to social networks to get the facts on current social issues. In the digital environment, however, they encounter fake profiles and news, as well as manipulative and aggressive content. Hateful messages, rejection of differences, and aggression towards vulnerable groups, which are presented as a threat, are widespread. 52% of Bulgarian youth aged 14-19 have been exposed to radical content online, inviting aggression and hatred against certain social groups, and between 12% and 16% of them show approval towards it. Passive and uncritical "consumption" of this type of content is associated with higher levels of endorsement of calls for violence or extreme action. These messages shift the focus away from the search for solutions to real societal problems and lead to the polarization of public opinion¹³¹.

UNICEF study "Media consumption "Influencers" of children and young people in Bulgaria 2020"¹³²

The results of a sociological study on the topic "Media consumption and "influencers" of children and young people in Bulgaria", conducted by the ESTAT Research Agency in the period June 19 - July 13, 2020 is based on a nationally representative study and six group discussions. The sample of the study is 1,773 individuals between the ages of 10 and 24 surveyed in Bulgaria in 2020. Against the background of constant digital connectivity, most children and young people consider what happens in the real world to be more important, stating a strong preference for live communication and social interaction. But while a large part of young people thinks critically about the time spent on social networks, there are young people who find it difficult to estimate exactly how much time they spend in contact with digital technologies - they grow up and live in parallel on the Internet. Accepting that their daily lives are irreversibly marked by the



Internet and digital media, the more important question is not whether children and young people are dependent and addicted to them, but what they do in virtual space, why they do it, and whether and how their digital habits can generate personal benefits.

Over 70% of Bulgarian children under the age of 12 have a profile and actively use social networks. This is shaping the trend towards a falling age at which children first access the internet, with social networks being used massively by under-age teenagers. Therefore, the risk for a child who does not yet have enough knowledge and has not developed critical thinking is to be misled by false information and begin to believe various things that are not true, and this can lead to problems in real life. Therefore, it is necessary to develop the necessary skills for critical thinking and working with media and multimedia content. 95% of Bulgarian Internet users use social networks, and this percentage includes children and young people who are the object of ridicule and harassment on social networks, and in over 80% of cases, online harassment is for fun. The study highlights a problem with hate speech - this is the so-called online harassment. About 20-25% of young people fall victim to something similar, which respectively leads to the conclusion that hate speech is increasing its presence among young people.

Connectivity risks and vulnerabilities are disproportionately greater among children and young people from vulnerable groups, for whom access to the Internet can be the difference between social exclusion and equal opportunity. Providing access to digital devices and connectivity that meets all digital needs, including educational ones, appears to be an unfinished business in Bulgaria.

The highest levels of penetration in the communication habits of children and young people have Facebook Messenger, which is preferred by more than half of the application users. Its main advantages are its integration with the social network of the same name, writing and speaking options, as well as group chats. Viber and Instagram Messenger also enjoy relatively high levels of popularity. Instagram Messenger creates the image of the most dynamically growing teenage communication channel. Short videos are the main and preferred format for children and young people, and YouTube is definitely the favorite platform for accessing them. Information campaigns and interventions with the greatest success are precisely those relying on short video content.

There are three social networks that are most popular among young people - Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. The social network for publishing not only photos, but also serious content is Facebook, which also explains its relatively



stronger positions among 20-24-year-olds. Instagram impresses with the variety of options it offers at once and the ease with which the mostly visual content there is consumed, which is why it is the fastest growing youth platform, especially among 15–19-year-olds. TikTok, where the emphasis falls on creating mainly funny videos, attracts the 10–14-year-olds to the greatest extent. The majority of children and young people use more than one social network.

A large part of young people in Bulgaria actively follows influencers and are specifically interested in content uploaded by vloggers. The most popular **vloggers** that attract the interest of young people are: AYDE BG channels, followed by The Clashers, Pavel Kolev and Itzaka, Emil Konrad, Stefie, inStanT and Andy Studio. Overall, **three groups of Internet celebrities can be distinguished** - those who primarily **entertain**, those who **talk about health, beauty, lifestyle, fitness and fashion**, as well as individuals whose online **content aims to inform** the audience, provoke them to think and inspire them. Interest in the first group is characteristic of all age groups, while enthusiasm for the second is more evident among 15-19- and 20-24-year-olds. Interest in the third group of influencers is often dictated by disapproval and criticism of the content by children and young people. To a large extent, they look to these influencers as speakers of inconvenient truths and debunkers of lies in various walks of life. Among boys and men, there is also a fascination with materials shared by successful business personalities such as popular Internet investors and entrepreneurs.

A significant part of the participants in the focus groups is characterized by a more active and creative media consumption, which most often includes the sharing of personal photos on Facebook and Instagram and videos on TikTok. There is an overall avoidance of expressing opinion, for example by commenting on topics perceived as too "serious". Behind the rather passive and devoid of self-expression behavior in social networks lies both the lack of self-esteem and confidence in some of the children and young people, as well as the reluctance for in-depth interaction in the sometimes misinforming and sometimes hostile environment of digital networks, which are characteristic of "fake news" and "hate" (including mockery, personal attacks, insults and verbal abuse). In support of this observation, almost half of those surveyed say that things they read and see on the Internet bother or upset them, and 8 in 10 agree that what they see on the Internet is not always true. The study shows that hate speech, verbal aggression, bullying, ridicule and attacks are one of the most serious obstacles to transforming the digital space into a platform for free expression of opinions on



topics important to the child and young person and the communities with which they are associated.

In Bulgaria among children and young people, there is a high level of digital inclusion and connectivity – nine out of ten respondents have a personal smartphone to access the Internet. However, it is worrying to note that many children and young people do not have their own device suitable for optimally meeting their educational needs and goals (such as a laptop, tablet, or desktop computer). Connectivity risks and vulnerabilities are disproportionately greater among children and young people from vulnerable groups, for whom access to the Internet can be the difference between social exclusion and equal opportunity. Providing access to digital devices and connectivity that meets all digital needs, including educational ones, appears to be an unfinished business in Bulgaria. The highest levels of penetration in the communication habits of children and young people have Facebook Messenger, which is preferred by more than half of those who use the application at least once a week. Its main advantages are its integration with the social network of the same name, writing and speaking options, as well as group chats. Viber and Instagram also enjoy relatively high levels of popularity. Viber enjoys the image of an application for connecting with elders - parents, relatives, and teachers, while Instagram creates the image of the most dynamically growing channel of communication for teenagers. Short videos are the main and preferred format for children and young people, and YouTube is definitely the favorite platform for accessing them. Information campaigns and interventions with the greatest success are precisely those relying on short video content. Across all three age groups, there is a stronger affinity for funny videos, music videos, beauty, health and fitness vlogs, and teen web series. The established low interest in "serious" content is a challenge, as topics important to children and youth and their development can hardly be presented in a fun and engaging format. There are three social networks that enjoy high popularity among children and young people - Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. The most established social network for publishing not only photos, but also serious content (such as news and analysis) is Facebook, which also explains its relatively stronger positions among 20-24-year-olds. Instagram impresses with the variety of options it offers at once and the ease with which the mostly visual content there is consumed, which is why it is the fastest growing youth platform, especially among 15–19-year-olds. TikTok, where the emphasis falls on creating mainly funny videos, attracts the 10–14-year-olds to the greatest extent. The majority of children and young people use more than one social network, but there are also digital sceptics who



define them as "superficial" and "a waste of time". To reach the target group of children and youth, a communication mix relying mostly on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok is recommended, and the videos aimed at the target groups can be initially uploaded on the YouTube platform. The dominant prediction of children and young people in the focus groups is that communication with each other will be more online, and the platform that the largest share of participants think will be indispensable in 2 years is Facebook. It is evident from the results that although they spend a long time in front of the screen, children and young people have a strong need for experiences in living life. They lead a parallel and dynamic digital and real life; therefore, an interesting possibility is to run a campaign that meets the two spaces^{133, 134}.

The situation in Bulgaria in 2023

Here are the essential headlines for digital adoption and use in Bulgaria in early 2023¹³⁵:

- There were 5.59 million internet users in Bulgaria at the start of 2023, when internet penetration stood at 83.1 percent.
- Bulgaria was home to 4.42 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 65.7 percent of the total population.
- A total of 9.79 million cellular mobile connections were active in Bulgaria in early 2023, with this figure equivalent to 145.5 percent of the total population.

Data published by Ookla indicate that internet users in Bulgaria have the following internet connection speeds at the start of 2023¹³⁶:

- Median mobile internet connection speed via cellular networks: 103.29 Mbps.
- Median fixed internet connection speed: 67.76 Mbps.

According to data from the National Statistical Institute, about 94% of Bulgarian citizens between the ages of 16 and 24 regularly use the Internet in 2023 (every day or at least once a week). In 2023, 88.5% of households in Bulgaria have access to the Internet in their homes, according to a study by the National Statistical Institute (NSI). From there, they report a growth of 31.8% for the last 10 years¹³⁷.



Table 5. Households with internet access¹³⁸

HOUSEHOLDS WITH INTERNET ACCESS (%)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	72,1	75,1	78,9	83,5	87,3	88,5
By residence						
Urban	76,3	79,7	83,8	87,4	88,8	91,8
Rural	59,0	60,0	63,4	71,5	82,4	77,0
By household type						
Households without children	66,4	70,0	75,5	80,0	84,4	87,1
Households with children	89,5	90,5	96,1	96,7	96,0	97,7
By type of connection						
Narrowband connection - Dial-up access over normal telephone line or ISDN & Mobile narrowband connection (via mobile phone network less than 3G, e.g. 2G+/GPRS, using (SIM) card or USB key, mobile phone or smart phone as modem)	2,6	1,5	3,6	.	.	.
Broadband connection - Fixed broadband connections, e.g. DSL, ADSL, VDSL, cable, optical fibre, satellite, Wi-Fi & Mobile broadband connections (via mobile phone network, at least 3G, e.g. UMTS, using (SIM) card or USB key, mobile phone or smart phone as modem)	71,5	74,9	78,6	83,5	.	.

Nearly 80% of people between the ages of 16 and 74 use the **Internet** daily or weekly, with students being the most active (99.3%). The number of people who have never surfed the **Internet** is also decreasing, as they are now 11.8%.

Table 6. Individuals regularly using the internet¹³⁹

REGULAR USE OF INTERNET (every day or at least once a week) (%)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total	63,6	66,8	69,2	73,9	79,0	79,8
By sex						
Male	64,9	68,1	70,6	75,1	79,9	80,5
Female	62,4	65,6	67,8	72,8	78,0	79,2
By education						
Basic education and lower	37,7	37,2	41,7	53,2	60,5	57,7
Secondary	64,6	69,0	69,3	75,2	79,9	80,2
Tertiary	89,6	91,7	93,8	92,7	94,2	95,6
By age						
16-24	92,2	90,3	91,5	92,9	95,1	93,6



REGULAR USE OF INTERNET (every day or at least once a week) (%)	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
25-34	86,9	88,4	90,3	90,4	93,6	94,7
35-44	80,4	83,5	86,0	89,2	90,0	91,6
45-54	65,7	73,7	75,6	82,1	86,4	89,3
55-64	45,2	50,8	54,5	63,1	71,8	73,3
65-74	17,8	19,8	23,8	30,8	41,0	44,6
By activity						
Employed	80,8	85,4	86,4	88,5	91,7	92,3
Unemployed	45,1	45,0	57,2	66,2	70,8	72,0
Students (inactive)	98,6	97,4	98,1	98,3	98,9	99,3
Other inactive	28,1	29,6	33,0	40,8	52,8	51,7

The most preferred device for accessing the **Internet** is the mobile phone (78.3%), and the main purpose for which it is used is communication.

Table 7. Devices used by individuals to access the internet¹⁴⁰

Devices (%)	2016	2018	2021	2023
Desktop computer	34,5	27,5	25,6	20,5
Laptop	30,5	32,5	30,7	33,5
Tablet	11,3	11,7	10,8	11,5
Mobile phone (or smart phone)	42,1	56,6	71,8	78,3
Other devices (e.g. smart TV, game console, e-book reader, smart watch)	1,4	1,1	6,0	7,4

More than two-thirds of users choose to spend their time online in phone and video conversations (69%), 65.4% use it for messaging, and 64.2% use it for social networks. Reading news sites, newspapers and magazines online is a service that 59% of respondents do, with the biggest gender divide seen when looking for health information - 50.6% of women used the global web for this purpose, while 35.4% of men.

Table 8. Individuals using the internet by purposes¹⁴¹

Purposes (%)	2023
Communication	
Sending / receiving e-mails	45,1
Making calls (including video calls) over the internet, for example, via Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp, Facetime, Viber, Snapchat, Zoom, MS Teams, Webex	69,0



Purposes (%)	2023
Participating in social networks (creating user profile, posting messages or other contributions to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok etc.)	64,2
Using instant messaging, i.e. exchanging messages, for example, via Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, Snapchat, Discord, Telegram	65,4
Access to information	
Reading online news sites / newspapers / news magazines	59,0
Seeking health-related information (e.g. injuries, diseases, nutrition, improving health, etc.)	43,1
Finding information about goods or services	50,7
Civic and political participation	
Expressing opinions on civic or political issues on websites or in social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube)	17,2
Taking part in online consultations or voting to define civic or political issues (e.g. urban planning, signing a petition)	6,8
Professional life	
Looking for a job or sending a job application	8,1
Other on-line services	
Selling of goods or services via a website or app (e.g. eBay, Facebook Marketplace, shpock)	8,6
Internet banking (including mobile banking)	23,4

2023 Data from the National Center for Safe Internet¹⁴² (safenet.bg)

The National Safer Internet Center in Bulgaria has been working to support children's online safety for over 16 years. There are two important services - **the Hotline** for reporting illegal online content and **the Children's Online Safety Advice Line**. Telephone number 124 123 is the telephone number on which children, parents and teachers can seek help, information and report an online problem with a child. As an organization protecting children online, the center believes that the best prevention for children is to develop skills and digital media literacy that builds their resilience to risky situations online. According to the center:

- The year 2023 sets a record for the number of reports received about Harmful Content and Online Crime Against Children: 46,359. This result is a double increase compared to 2022 (23,080 reports for 2022);
- In 2023 95% of complaints are related to online sexual exploitation of children. This is the highest number of alerts processed since the beginning of the Center's existence within 1 calendar year. A detailed



breakdown shows that the number of cases that a Safer Internet Center has identified and referred to other Safer Internet Centers in Europe is 17,541;

- In 2023 28,818 are the signals sent to the Bulgarian center by international partners related to harmful content and online crimes against children. All of them have been processed and sent to the "Cybercrime" Directorate, to the GDBOP, of which the Center is a trusted partner;
- A total of 362 consultations were made on Helpline #124123 in 2023. In 60% of cases, parents sought help from the center, and more men (fathers). Chat was used by children in 1/3 (106) of all the alerts. 25% of the cases are related to prevention – parents sought consultation and information on how to protect their children and how to develop their skills in the digital space. 15% reported encountered potentially harmful content, 10% of cases were about online harassment and another 10% were scams and threats. In 12% of cases, children called about broken accounts or questions about how to protect their accounts;
- The permitted age for creating a profile in Tik Tok is 13 years, and for Bulgaria it is 14 years. Many children under 13 have a profile on the social network, stating the age of 18+ when creating the profile. This, along with their profile being public, exposes them to many risks that they are not aware of or taught how to stay safe;
- The Safe Internet Center met another wave of challenges for children in the digital space, and has trained 450 children and 250 parents, thanks to financial support from CENTIO #Cybersecurity. The partnership between the organization and the cybersecurity company began in early 2023, after the center was threatened with closure due to lack of funding, and continues to this day.

Freedom of expression and safety in Bulgaria

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression”. This is enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This fundamental right constitutes a pillar of democratic society and serves as a benchmark for level of democracy in a country. Freedom of expression extends to the point where one infringes on others’ freedoms, i.e. by offending them, injuring their honor and dignity or humiliating them. Hence, the right to freedom of expression is not absolute. In accordance with Article 10(2) of the European Convention on Human Rights, freedom of expression may be subject to such restrictions as prescribed by national law and necessary for the protection of ‘the reputation



or rights of others' and in the interest of 'national security, territorial integrity or public safety'. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, freedom of expression 'shall not be used to the detriment of the rights and reputation of others, or for the incitement of a forcible change of the constitutionally established order, the perpetration of a crime, or the incitement of enmity or violence against anyone. "The Bulgarian Criminal Code" also provides for penalties in cases of hate or violence speech and discrimination based on race, nationality or ethnicity¹⁴³.

The safety of young people in social networks – Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, there is still no strategy aimed at overcoming the security risks of young people on the Internet. Competences in this area are distributed among different state bodies, but this is another prerequisite for blurring responsibility. The authorities that mainly deal with the issues of children's safety on the Internet are the State Agency for Child Protection, the Ministry of Transport, Information Technologies and Communications, as well as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.



2. NORTH MACEDONIA

Social media plays a significant role in teen culture in North Macedonia today.

Teens and social media use: What's the impact?¹⁴⁴ (2018)

A 2018 Pew Research Center survey of nearly 750 children between 13 and 17 years old, found that 45% are online almost constantly and 97% use a social media platform, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat.

Use of the internet (2018-2019)¹⁴⁵

Young people on average spend approximately 3 hours per day watching TV and 6 hours on the Internet. It is interesting to note that compared to the 2013 Youth Study, the time spent on the Internet has increased by 2 whole hours, while there has been no change regarding time spent watching TV.

In terms of the number of friends in the social network they mostly use, different responses were registered, with 42% having more than 501 friends, 23% having between 201 and 500,

15 % between 51 and 200, and 15 % up to 50 friends. In turn, the answer to the next question, “how many of their friends/ contacts on the social network they could consider to be in their close circle of friends in their everyday life”, indicates that these numbers have plummeted, with answers generally hovering around number 5 and the first five-decade numbers.

Furthermore, young people were asked how often they use the Internet for certain purposes (on a scale from 1 (never) to 3 (often), and the data from the mean value analysis show that youth usually use the Internet for social networks and communication with relatives and friends – which altogether denotes social activities, then for school/education and/or work, and finally and equally for reading online news/getting informed and downloading, and listening to music. Young people use the Internet the least for online banking and valuation of products and/or services:

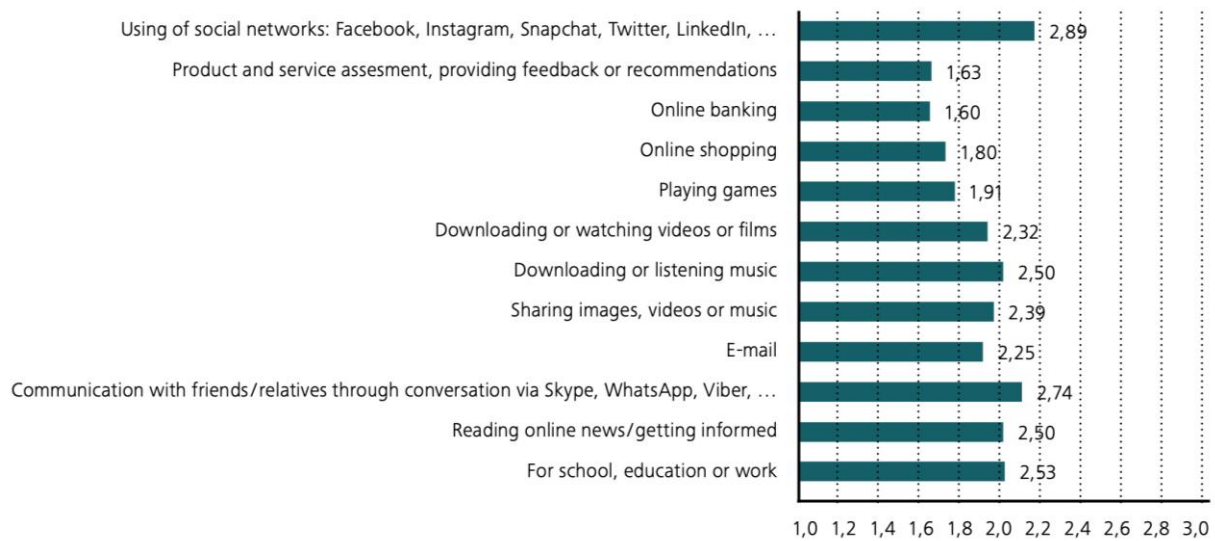


Figure 13. How often do you use Internet for certain purposes?¹⁴⁶

The mean value of $m=2.50$ was obtained for the following question: How much do you trust social networks regarding responsible use of your personal data? (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all, and 5 is completely). This confirms once again that young people in Macedonia without doubt belong to generations Y and Z. Although they do not trust social networks, they do not mind being part of them, accepting partially known or completely unknown persons as “friends”, and sharing personal data online.

The responses obtained from this set of questions show that young people, members of the two generations most exposed to technological change in history, at the same time live in two worlds: one real and one virtual. Young people mainly perceive the benefits from the Internet as an opportunity for social interaction and communication, education, obtaining information, and entertainment/ amusement.

In the context of certain assumptions that stress positive aspects, the Internet also has a negative impact on youth and their success at school/faculty, with the test of the correlation between the time spent on the Internet and school/ academic success showing a positive correlation ($r=107$, $p=0.05$), or proportional relationship between the number of hours and marks, meaning that such hypothesis could be rejected.



Internet statistics about North Macedonia (2021)¹⁴⁷

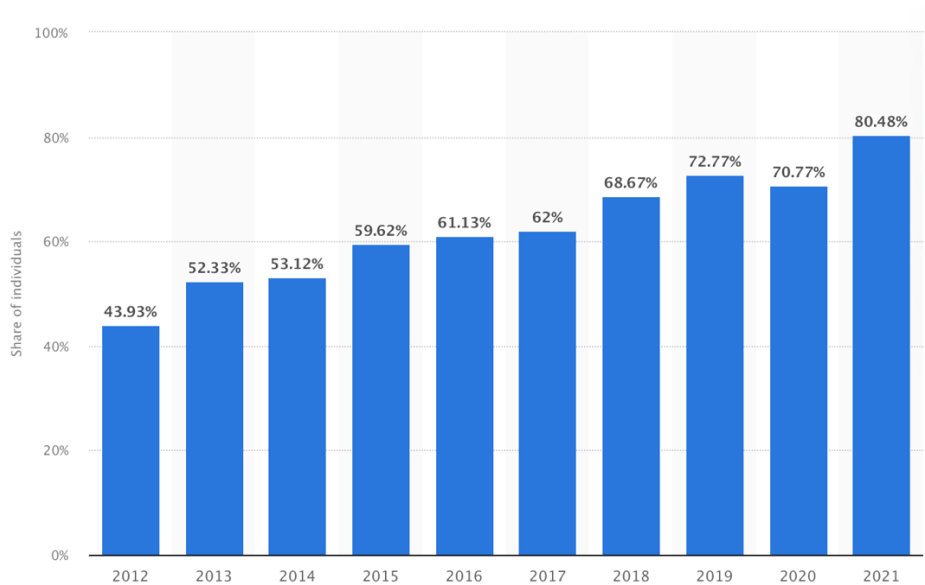


Figure 14. Share of daily internet users in North Macedonia 2012-2021

The share of daily internet users in North Macedonia increased by 9.7 percentage points since the previous year. Therefore, the share of daily internet users in North Macedonia reached a peak in 2021 with 80.48 percent. Notably, the share of daily internet users has been, except for 2020, continuously increasing over the last years (see figure below).

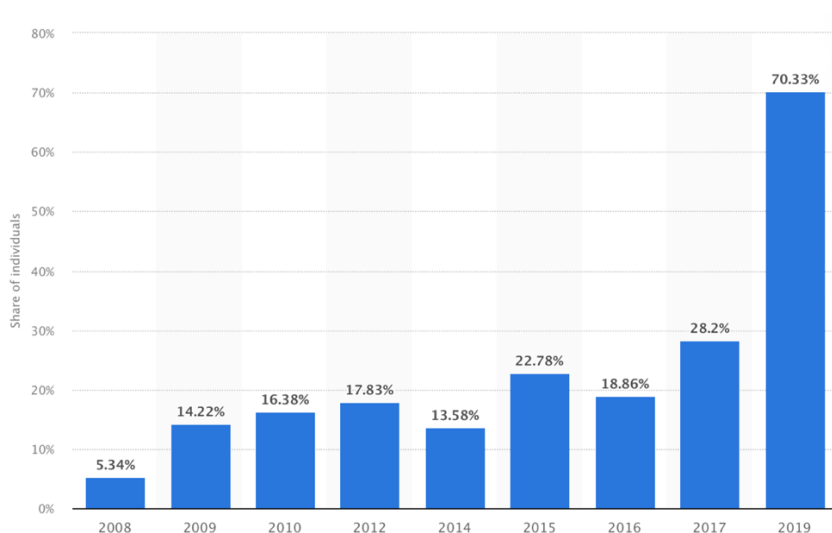


Figure 15. Share of internet users in North Macedonia that upload self-created content online 2008 - 2019



In 2019, the share of people that upload self-created content in North Macedonia increased significantly by 42.1 percentage points since 2017. Therefore, the share of people that upload self-created content in North Macedonia reached a peak in 2019 with 70.33 percent (see figure above).

Teens, Social Media and Online Privacy (2022)¹⁴⁸

A survey conducted by the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) asked teens between 14 and 18 years old about use of social networks and online privacy in North Macedonia. The survey shows that more than 99% of teens have used social media. On average, teens are online more than 5 hours a day. When it comes to which one of the online platforms teens use the most, the vast majority say they visit Instagram (97.57%), TikTok (73.69%) or Snapchat (71.27%) most often.

Despite the nearly ubiquitous presence of social media in their lives, there is no clear consensus among teens about what to do if they experience violation of personal data online. A plurality of teens (88%) believe they know how to act if their personal data is misused, but the responses vary in terms of where they will report such case. Roughly three-in-ten teens say they will report the case to the police or their parents and teachers, while 12% don't know where they can report.

Youngsters are also aware that social media platforms can be the place for cyberbullying and online gender-based violence. Some young people report that they were subject to online harassment or that their photos were published online without their permission (12%).

When asked if they know someone (classmate, friend, acquaintance) who has suffered online gender-based violence and to explain in their own words, many teens emphasize the negative aspects of the use of social media:

- "In games sometimes there is a call option for you to speak with people you might not know. Sometimes people say rude things to the other people they are talking to just because of their gender."
- "I have had some friends experience it and that made me feel a bit helpless because there was nothing, I could do except be there for them through that time."
- "Many sexist comments on TikTok and Instagram are highly inappropriate."



MYLA conducts the survey within the Project "Your Privacy is Your Freedom" supported by the American Bar Association - Rule of Law Initiative, where a survey was conducted among students in four high schools in North Macedonia in February 2022 with 825 respondents¹⁴⁹.

Privacy of children and young people in the world of modern technologies (Internet and social networks), (2022)^{150, 151}

According to recent research, 93% of children have a Facebook profile, while 84% have Internet access on their mobile phones. UNICEF statistics show that more than 5% of Internet users are subject to peer violence, with 30% reporting experiencing such an experience twice a month. Tik Tok is the most popular social network right now. It can be compared to YouTube, Instagram or Facebook applications, but for some reason Tik Tok has a lot of popularity and stands out from the competition.

UNICEF: More efforts needed to protect children online (2023)¹⁵²

More than 400 children and young people from North Macedonia took part in a U-Report poll on online safety conducted in 2023. One in three (31 per cent) of the respondents reported having experienced online bullying. Many, 18 per cent recognize that lack of knowledge and information on how to stay protected is one of the reasons why online violence persists, while as many as 41 per cent believe that it is not taken seriously by institutions.

Growing up online offers limitless opportunities for critical learning, skills development and to express themselves. According to latest data every (100 per cent) young person aged 15-24 in our country uses the internet and almost all (97 per cent) use it several times every day.

However, increasing amounts of time on virtual platforms can also leave children more vulnerable to cyberbullying and other forms of peer-to-peer violence, hate speech and exposure to harmful content – including messages that incite self-harm and even suicide.

Most alarming is the increased threat of sexual abuse and exploitation including grooming and child trafficking. Data from Disrupting Harm – a large scale research project - estimates that millions of children were subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse across the thirteen countries participating in the research in 2020 alone.



In its most recent report (2022) the Committee on the Rights of the Child welcomes measures taken by the country to combat violence against children, including legal reforms, adoption of the new national action plans and the ratification of additional international conventions. However, it urges the country to develop targeted response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Committee also points to the need of allocating sufficient human and technical and financial resources to implement the National strategy for the prevention and protection of children from violence (2020–2025) and establishing mandatory reporting system, child-friendly and multiagency investigation, and intervention in all cases of violence against children – including in the digital environment.

Campaign against cyberbullying and online hate speech co-created with youth “Cyberbullying - Bye! Bye!”, UNICEF and Telekom Foundation for Macedonia (2023)¹⁵³

Children and young people are spending more time online than ever before. According to State Statistics Office (2023), in North Macedonia almost all - 98.8% of youth 15-24 years use the internet every day with some nine in ten young people using it to engage in social networks and using instant messaging where most cyberviolence and cyber-bullying takes place.

Under the title “Together for a hate-free internet”, this initiative is part of the long-term partnership between UNICEF and Telekom Foundation for Macedonia aimed to engage children and young people in tackling some of the biggest challenges facing their generation.

Media literacy and safe use of new media (2023)¹⁵⁴

The Republic of North Macedonia has no specific Strategy for Media literacy and safe use of new media currently, but the topic of media literacy is covered within other strategies and laws. The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services is responsible for development and promotion of media literacy and safe use of new media. In that direction in 2015, the Agency developed a document Program for Promoting Media Literacy in the Republic of Macedonia 2016-2018. The document aimed to provide directions for the development and promotion of media literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia. In March 2019 the Agency published the Media Literacy Policy. The scope of this document is to illustrate



the way forward, after expiring of the abovementioned program. In the new National Youth Strategy (2023-2027), a dedicated chapter is specifically devoted to youth information. Within this chapter, one of the strategic goals is precisely to empower young people with knowledge and skills for media and digital literacy. This includes the ability to recognize disinformation, articulate personal interests, and express opinions as active citizens in society with developed critical awareness.

In the Republic of North Macedonia there is no single document, law, strategy, program for development of education, in which media literacy is incorporated, despite the numerous reforms in the curricula and subjects and in their content, both in primary and secondary education. Even in the relatively new Education Strategy 2018-2025, Media Literacy as a term has not been mentioned at all. Yet, one of the focuses of the Strategy is development of generic and core competencies of pupils (and all learners), for them to develop into critical thinkers, active and relevant participants in social life.

There is no separate study program for media literacy that is taught in schools, but certain segments of the media (their characteristics, differences between false and real news, as well as education for recognizing information sources and assessing their quality) are present in the curriculum on the subject Civic Education in Primary and Secondary Education. But the total fund of classes where these topics are discussed is almost negligible, which makes it difficult to talk about the acquisition of comprehensive knowledge in this field.

Occasionally there are trainings and conferences aiming to raise awareness about the risk posed by new media, targeting mostly youth, but also educational workers, journalists and public.

New data regarding the opinion of young people in North Macedonia and their experience in social networks have been published as a result of surveys conducted in the country in 2023. These surveys relate to internet safety and children's rights in the digital world. Both studies concern the risks for young people on the Internet, their experiences and opportunities for prevention. More at <https://mk.ureport.in/opinion/3256/> (about Internet security with 428 respondents) and at <https://mk.ureport.in> (about the rights of children in the digital world with 979 respondents).



Protection of personal data when using the Internet (2024)¹⁵⁵

On the European Day for the Protection of Personal Data, on January 29, 2024, representatives from the Agency for the Protection of Personal Data of North Macedonia held lectures in Macedonian and Albanian on the topic "Protection of personal data when using the Internet" in the secondary schools "Georgi Dimitrov" in Skopje and "Kiril Pejcinović" in Tetovo. The young listeners get acquainted with the work of the Agency in relation to the protection of personal data, they were offered advice on protecting privacy and identity on the Internet and were presented with safety measures when using social networks. Information and advice were also shared at the lectures: "Privacy of children and young people in the world of modern technologies (Internet and social networks)", to educate young people about the importance and respect of privacy, because they consume the benefits of digitization every day.



3. POLAND

The purpose of the chapter is to present the latest data on the scale of threats faced by Polish children and youth on the Internet, particularly those using generally available social media.

The study uses information from the "Report on threats to the safety and development of children in Poland", Children count (2022¹⁵⁶, "Threats to children and youth related to the use of the Internet" developed by Szymon Wójcik in the frame of "Dajemy dzieciom siłę" foundation and a report on Polish research "EU Kids online 2018" developed by the Adam Mickiewicz University team composed of Jacek Pyżalski, Aldona Zdrodowska, Lukasz Tomczyk, Katarzyna Abramczuk.

The Internet, like any human activity, has both advantages and disadvantages. The Internet influences people's attitudes and has a strong influence on the way we study, work, communicate, spend our free time and, finally, do business. At the same time, the Internet carries a lot of threats both from the people who use it, as well as the content published there and the available tools.

According to Eurostat data, in 2021, 92% of Polish households had access to the Internet, which corresponded to the European average¹⁵⁷. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office, access to the Internet was even higher among households with children under the age of 15 and amounted to 99.5%. Public statistics also confirm that young people are the group that uses the Internet the most intensively (99.2% declare regular use) and have relatively the highest digital competences compared to older groups¹⁵⁸.

Unfortunately, the intensive development of the Internet and the increasing accessibility to the network and social networking sites is associated with the growing scale of threats among young people. Online security is a complex and heterogeneous area. The threat concerns the content available in it, dangerous contacts and interactions within the peer group.

How do children and young people use the Internet?

The access of children and young people to the Internet is so widespread that currently there are almost no young people who would not use this medium. Public statistics also confirm that young people are the group that uses the Internet the most intensively (99.2% declare regular use). In the last decade, the availability of mobile internet (mainly via smartphones) has also increased. According to Eurostat, in 2019, in the youngest surveyed age group (16-24 years



old), the use of mobile internet in Poland was 93% (EU average: 94%), while in 2012 it was only 46%. Also, according to surveys conducted among children aged 12-17, in 2018 over 97% of this population used the Internet on smartphones and mobile phones (on laptops: 76.5%)¹⁵⁹.

As for the time spent on the Internet, according to the Teens 3.0 study in the 2020 edition, the average time is 4 hours, 50 min weekdays and over 6 hours on weekends. Moreover, it turns out that every ninth teenager (11.5%) declares that he is active online for more than 8 hours a day, and every sixth (16.9%) uses it intensively after 10 pm¹⁶⁰.

A very important element of using the Internet is having a social media account. This is a very common way of using the Internet, which can bring several benefits (e.g., help build social relations, exchange information) as well as a lot of risks (e.g., expose to cyberbullying, violate privacy). Research has shown that 72.6% of young people have such an account. There are no significant differences between boys and girls in this regard. Younger children have a profile much less frequently (less than half) compared to adolescents (almost 80%)¹⁶¹.

As for the very fact of using social networking sites, according to a study conducted for the Empowering Children Foundation (Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation, FDDS) in 2021, 96% of teenagers use social networking sites at least once a day (23% declare that they do it all day or constantly, and another 40% - several times a day). Facebook was still the most popular (89%), followed by Instagram (68%) and TikTok (64%), ahead of Snapchat (51%). In addition, despite the 13-year-old limit set in the regulations of most portals, younger children also commonly use them¹⁶².

What is the scale of threats on the Internet, including social media?

Internet is needed. It allows you to explore the world and develop, communicate and establish relationships, provides entertainment and facilitates a lot of everyday matters. Despite this, it is also full of threats for which young people are not prepared, and they cannot effectively defend themselves against them.

Exposure to harmful content

Exposure of children and young people to harmful content is a significant concern in today's digital age. With the widespread use of the internet and various digital platforms, children have access to a wide range of information, some of which may be inappropriate or harmful to their well-being. This content primarily includes pornography and materials showing violence and encouraging behavior that is harmful to health (e.g., drug use) or self-destructive (self-harm,



suicide, etc.). Research data from various sources allow us to unequivocally state that children and teenagers in Poland relatively often encounter content that is harmful to them. Accurately measuring the scale of this problem is difficult for several reasons. First, in surveys, some young people may be unwilling or ashamed to admit they have been exposed to such content. Secondly, different studies define such content differently.

In 2017, „Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę Foundation”, commissioned by the Ministry of Health, conducted a survey on a representative nationwide sample of children and youth (N = 3943) entitled “Exposure of children and adolescents to pornography”¹⁶³. They showed that 43% of children and teenagers aged 11-18 had contact with pornographic and sexualizing materials. The older the age group, the greater the scale of contact with pornography – in the 15-16 age group it was already 55%, and in the oldest group (17-18 years) - 63%.

In addition, as many as 22% of all young Internet users watched pornographic materials containing content about verbal and physical aggression. When it comes to young people aged 12-17 being exposed to other categories of harmful content, almost a third (31.8%) had been exposed to content containing actual scenes of cruelty and violence, and over a quarter to content about self-harm (26,1%), pornographic content (25.2%) and hate speech (23.9%). It was followed by content promoting eating disorders (19%), showing ways of committing suicide (15.8%) and encouraging the use of drugs (8%).

Grooming

Grooming typically involves a gradual process where the perpetrator gains the trust and confidence of the victim, often by manipulating their emotions and exploiting vulnerabilities. The goal is to establish control and manipulate the victim into engaging in activities they would not otherwise consent to, such as sexual abuse, exploitation, or involvement in criminal behavior.

Online grooming of children is one of the more serious risks that many parents fear. According to CBOS research (2018), 43% of parents are afraid of dangerous contacts, including exposure to pedophilic attacks or incitement to prostitution.

In the latest Teens 3.0 survey¹⁶⁴ conducted among primary school students (grade 7) and secondary school students (grade 2), in total, almost a quarter of the surveyed adolescents (14.1%) admitted that they happened to meet directly with an adult they met on the Internet¹⁶⁵.

More risky behavior related to meeting strangers were included in the Polish edition of the EU Kids Online 2018 study¹⁶⁶ (on a sample of children aged 9-17).



The largest percentage of respondents admitted to looking for new friends and acquaintances on the Internet, less often respondents declared sending their photos, videos or data to their online friends¹⁶⁷.

Sexting

Sexting, which refers to sending or receiving of sexually explicit messages, images or videos via electronic means such as text messages or social media, is very risky when done over the internet. The latest data on the scale of sexting come from the latest edition of the Teens 3.0 study already cited, conducted among students in the 7th grade of primary school and 2nd grade of secondary school in 2020. When asked about receiving “naked or semi-naked photos”, 8.3% of the respondents answered affirmatively and 2.2% admitted sending them¹⁶⁸.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying refers to the act of using electronic communication platforms, such as social media, online forums, or messaging apps, to harass, intimidate, or harm others. It involves repeated and deliberate aggressive behavior with the intention to cause emotional distress or humiliation. Cyberbullying can take various forms, including sending threatening or derogatory messages, spreading rumors or lies, sharing embarrassing photos or videos, impersonating someone, or excluding individuals from online groups or communities.

The year 2003 is considered in the literature on bullying as the approximate time from which electronic peer violence, commonly known as cyberbullying, began to be discussed. The Teens 3.0 study¹⁶⁹ from 2020 showed that almost one third of respondents (29.7%) experienced online challenges, more than every fifth of them (22.8%) were humiliated or ridiculed online, every ninth (11%) – experienced impersonation, and every tenth (10.5%) – was blackmailed. Almost as many respondents, 10.2%, admitted that compromising materials were disseminated on the Internet.

International research projects were also carried out to measure the phenomenon of online peer violence in a comparative perspective. In the EU Kids Online study¹⁷⁰ from 2018, a cyberbullying victimization rate of 40% was recorded in Poland, and 38% of perpetration. These exceptionally high results placed Poland in the infamous first place among 16 European countries and well above the average.



Problematic Internet Use

Problematic internet use or compulsive internet use, refers to excessive and compulsive use of the internet that interferes with daily life and functioning. It is characterized by a strong urge or need to be online, difficulty controlling internet use, neglect of other activities, and negative consequences resulting from excessive internet use. In one of the larger research projects on this issue - the European EU NET ADB study¹⁷¹ from 2012, an adaptation of the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Young (2016) was used, in which answering many questions about the use of the Internet, one can get 0-100 points. Respondents who scored ≥ 70 points were classified as showing signs of abuse, and those with 40–69 points were classified as at risk. In Poland, a representative sample of students from the 3rd grade of lower secondary schools participated in the study (N = 1978). The results placed the country in the middle of the ranking and close to the European average - 1.3% of students had symptoms of Internet addiction, and 12% were in the risk group. The scale of addiction was slightly higher among boys than girls, but these differences were not significant.

A similar methodology (the same test and criteria) was used in studies repeated in 2018, commissioned by the Fund for Solving Gambling Problems, on a representative sample of 1,017 students aged 12-17. This time, 0.5% of the respondents showed symptoms of addiction, and 11.4% were in the risk group¹⁷².



4. AUSTRIA

Studies such as the Youth Internet Monitor 2021 by the Saferinternet.at initiative, the study "Young Austrians in the Digital Age", "Junge Österreicherinnen und Österreicher im digitalen Zeitalter" by the Instituts für Jugendkulturforschung, the study "Children and Young People in the Digital World" ("Kinder und Jugendliche in der digitalen Welt") by the Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs provide important information about risks, associated with social media in Austria and help to develop strategies to avoid and minimize these risks.

According to the HBSG study by the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection from 2018, which examined the "Use of smartphones and social media by Austrian schoolchildren" („Nutzung von Smartphones und sozialen Medien durch österreichische Schülerinnen und Schüler“) it appears that between 10% and 30% of young people worldwide show problematic smartphone use, which is reflected in the form of health problems. The study in Austria shows that girls use their mobile phones much more often than boys and the time spent increases for both sexes up to the age of 15. The familial socio-economic background of young people also has a decisive influence on usage behavior in social media. The poorer the financial background, the more time young people spend with their mobile phones than young people who come from families that are financially better off.

According to their analyzed usage behavior, 9% of Austrian schoolchildren show signs of dependence or a loss of control. Girls are affected more often than boys. Respondents gave the reason for the disproportionate use as wanting to flee from negative feelings. This disproportionate use is particularly evident among young people. The older they get, the longer the duration of daily cell phone use increases. This also affects their health. Those who often complain about health problems can be found in the frequent cell phone user group. Overall, it was found that problematic use of social media primarily affects the psyche. This is accompanied by lower life satisfaction, depression, negative self-perception, etc.

With the disproportionate use of social media, the risk of (cyber)bullying, sexting, happy slapping, school stress, bad relationships with classmates and sporting inactivity also increases¹⁷³.

The study on the topic "Life in the online stream: social networks & self-portrayal" („Das Leben im Online-Stream: Soziale Netzwerke & Selbstdarstellung“) was carried out by the Institute for Youth Culture Research



and Cultural Education on behalf of Saferinternet.at and ISPA - Internet Service Providers Austria and as part of the 18th International "Safer Internet Day" presented in 2021. This shows that social media is becoming increasingly important for young people. Even if children and young people know a lot about "proper" communication, they encounter many risks on the Internet. Above all, unwanted publications are a big issue for them. In Austria, children encounter social media for the first time at the age of 11 and usually use two or three platforms at the same time. The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on user behavior. While before that social media was mainly used for self-expression purposes, today it is mainly used for communication followed by the search for information and entertainment.

"The targeted selection of platforms and a more conscious approach to online self-portrayal are signs of a development towards a more mature use of social networks by young people," observed Matthias Jax, project manager of Saferinternet.at, in workshops and discussions with young people¹⁷⁴.

This can also be seen in the "Youth Internet Monitor 2021" („Jugend-Internet-Monitor 2021“), because two thirds of the young people stated that they fear that every picture posted has been edited. Likewise, two-thirds of those surveyed are of the opinion that image processing is important. And as many as 79 percent of young people stated that young people try to present themselves better online than they are. Based on these statements, young people are reflecting on their behavior in relation to the publication of pictures. The study also showed that young people want to be in control online. 29% of those surveyed regularly deal with their privacy settings in social media. That's not to say they're the only ones who know about privacy settings, but the other 35% of respondents who do know only engage with it on first-time use. 14% of the respondents could not do anything with privacy settings. Overall, however, the answers show that there is an awareness of the need to protect privacy, but that there is room for improvement. This is particularly evident when young people think they are acting in the interests of private security simply because they are posting temporary content such as "stories" on the internet. Adolescents indicated that this approach gave them more control over their images. More than two-thirds of young people feel that the publication of pictures should be considered because they are ashamed of some published pictures.

The so-called "orphaned" accounts are also a problem for young people. 41% of young people stated that they have at least one such account. There is a lack of



clarification on how to deal with the "digital legacy" because not all traces on the Internet will be beneficial in the future.

Although young people are accumulating more and more knowledge in "dealing with social networks" and are becoming better and better at dealing with them, they repeatedly encounter negative experiences on the Internet. More than a fifth of those surveyed experienced that others had shared pictures of them online without their consent. 16% stated that even their parents had spread unpleasant things about them online. According to these results, it seems very important to offer training courses to raise awareness of this within the framework of the teacher-pupil-parent triangle. The involvement of teachers and parents is particularly important, as 32% of those surveyed stated that they had learned how to use social networks safely through education and workshops from the school, parents (28%) and friends (28%). If you consider that 49% of young people are confronted with a hacked online profile and only 59% of those questioned believe that internet challenges are dangerous, it is essential to promote further education in this regard^{175,176}.

The risks that Austrian young people are exposed to in social networks are a growing concern. Cyberbullying has been identified as one of the top risks young people face on social media platforms. Young people's response to cyberbullying can vary depending on their offline social context, which can include factors such as the availability of friends and family, as well as isolation and lack of friends.

Some of the most common risks are:

- **Cyberbullying:** This occurs when someone is insulted, threatened, or harassed online. Young people are often the target of cyberbullying, which can cause serious emotional and psychological harm.
- **Sexting:** This refers to sending or receiving sexually explicit messages, photos, or videos. Young people may face undue pressure to share or receive such content, which can lead to serious consequences such as damage to their reputation and even criminal prosecution.
- **Online identity theft:** Criminals can steal young people's personal information and use it for illegal purposes, such as engaging in fraudulent activities or taking over social media accounts.
- **Contact with Strangers:** Young people can easily come into contact with strangers online who may not have the best of intentions. It is important to be careful and aware of who is behind a profile.



According to a study by the University of Innsbruck, Austria at the Institute for Geography on the subject of (cyber)bullying among digitally networked young people, there is an increased need to conduct disparate research that examines traditional bullying and/ or cyberbullying and not only in terms of each of their inimitable spaces alone, but in terms of their common intersections. Because: “By taking a perspective on cON/FFlating spaces, we try to achieve a better understanding of the cON/FFlating nature and spaces of bullying in the digital age and the conceptualization of these interconnected and intertwined socio-material-technological to deepen spaces.”¹⁷⁷. Definition of “cON/FFlating spaces” is “cON/FFlating spaces are characterized by multifarious (power) relations, practices, knowledge, and (re)presentations that stretch across both, online and offline, spheres.”¹⁷⁸. According to Venden Abeele, Professor of Digital Culture at the University of Ghent, Belgium, young people no longer perceive the Internet as a separate "cyberspace". These “spaces” are deeply integrated into their everyday life and harbor many risks. The study was based on stories told by young people in Austria and their (cyber)bullying experiences in online/ offline spaces - youth geographies. As early as 2011, academics pointed out that there was not enough research in Austria in the field of (cyber)mobbing and a study by the OECD from 2015 showed that around 21.3% of young people in Austrian schools are bullied. This data gave rise to the study at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, which focused on the following research questions:

- Whether and how bullying in physical and digital spaces overlaps in school contexts?
- What are the characteristic premises of bullying in physical and digital spaces in the school context?

This new research approach, looking at an interwoven construct of offline and digital spaces, initially neglected the subjective perspectives of young people, their experiences and the overlapping of these spaces. But this is precisely what is important and should be taken into account when trying to find out how bullying works as a process. According to the psychologists from the School of Psychology, Edith Cowan University in Joondalup, Australia, it is of crucial importance to examine (cyber)mobbing experiences from the point of view of children and young people¹⁷⁹. Considering the cON/FFlating space is one way of examining how bullying practices are created in cON/FFlating spaces and, in part, are conditioned. It is becoming increasingly easier for children and young people to conquer new digital spaces, which then become part of children's and young people's everyday spaces. The evaluation revealed that bullying practices were



often carried out in a simultaneous, sequential or linked process in both the offline and digital realms. Bullying often begins offline and then expands to the digital space.

Bullying takes place offline as well as online (cyber-bullying) or in parallel. According to the survey, this form of bullying – cON/OFFlating – increases the way bullying occurs even more. Most of the time, the people involved in the bullying process know each other and take on the same roles both online and offline (perpetrator, accomplice, witness, ...). However, it also happens that there is a change of roles, and a perpetrator, who bullies offline in the digital space becomes a victim himself. Respondents to the study who were affected by online bullying reported that these attacks did not stop until they left school. This means that offline and online spaces are often connected and mutually dependent. The study also shows that bullying is mainly practiced via WhatsApp, as well as via Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.¹⁸⁰

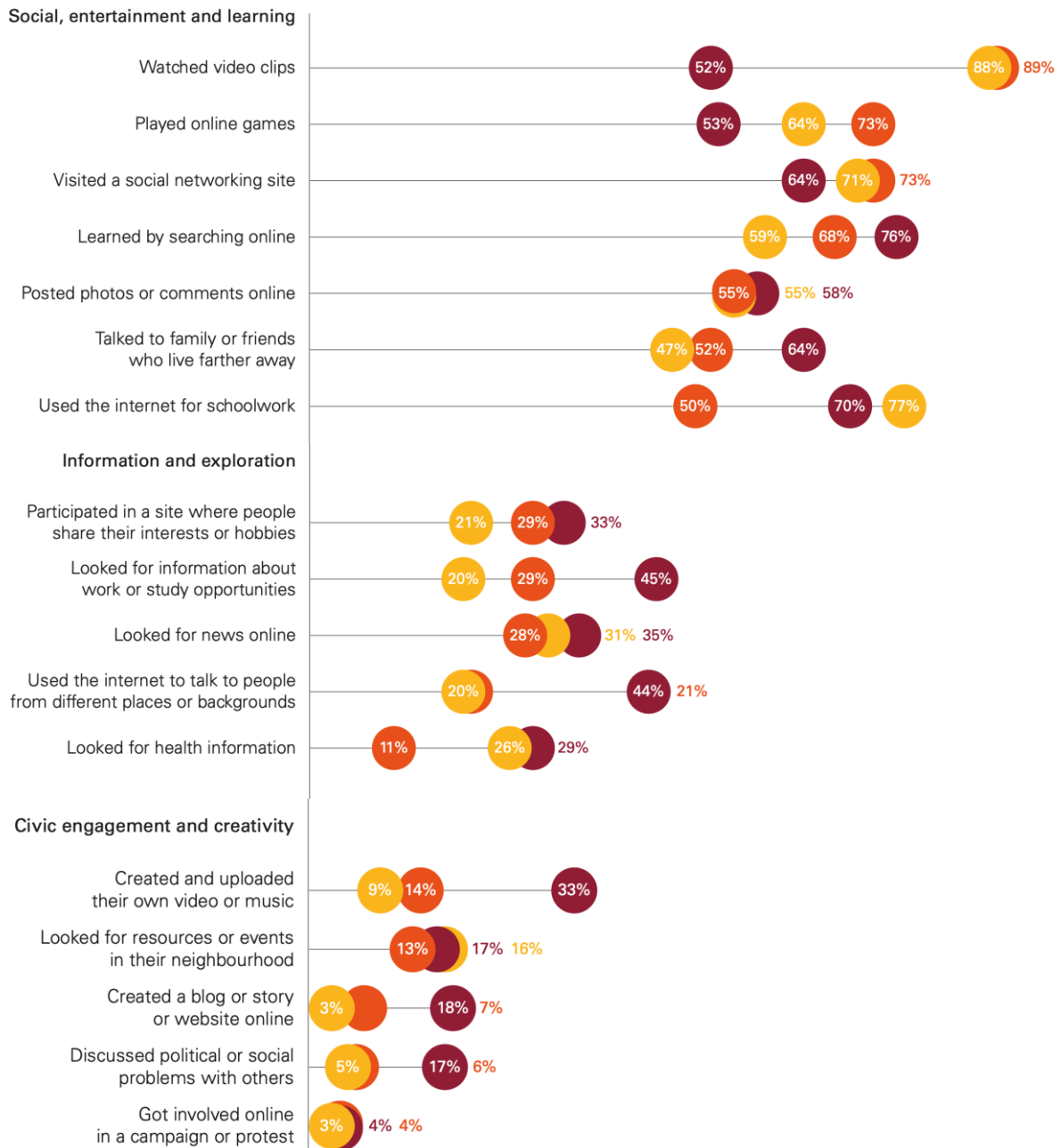
A survey conducted in Austria and Turkey found that WhatsApp was the most commonly used bullying platform in the analyzed data¹⁸¹.

In some cases, young people have been victims of bullying on school digital learning platforms. Due to the numerous digital spaces in which bullying can take place, it can be assumed that bullying is practiced in a polymedia environment, i.e., in many digital spaces¹⁸².

Online gaming platforms are currently experiencing particularly high demand. A particularly up-and-coming platform is Roblox. Roblox scores particularly well with girls between the ages of 11 and 14 (girls' 24 percent, boys' 17 percent). Barbara Buchegger, who works on the Saferinternet.at initiative, explains this trend as follows: "On Roblox there are avatars that you can design individually. Younger girls in particular find that very attractive."¹⁸³



B. WORLDWIDE



**Figure 16. What are children doing online?
(Percentage of children aged 9-17, reporting involvement in online activities,
2016 – 2017)**



Growing up has never been an easy and straight-forward process. The list of problems and challenges children have to deal with or overcome seems to be endless. The puberty brings the rapid physical changes, which can cause concerns, worries and uneasiness. There are different psychological and emotional changes, as the youngsters try to form new social networks outside their family and assert their role in these new relationships. This process helps the young people to become independent and self-confident, but can also lead to conflicts, rejections, disappointments, distress. Inevitably, the path to independence and adulthood leads through a field of new experiences, some of which may be risky or even dangerous. Wanting to fit in with their peers, many young people experiment with alcohol, cigarettes or even narcotics. The sexualized media environment and pressure to have a certain look or appearance can lead to depression, low self-esteem, eating and sleeping disorders and other psycho-emotional problems. Next on the list are the challenges related to school performance, sexuality and sexual relations, inter-generational conflicts, bullying and other abuse among peers. Internet and digital technologies should not be seen as another challenge on this list. Rather, they are a tool through which old challenges can appear in a new form. The more time children spend online, the more risks they face.

A poll, conducted by **UNICEF and Ipsos in April 2016 in 25 countries from around the globe**, shows that the majority (80%) of children and teenagers are aware that internet hides numerous risks and dangers, and over half (57%) think that their friends engage in risky behavior online. At the same time, almost 90% of teenage boys and girls believe that they know how to avoid dangerous or risky situations online, and two thirds believe that online bullying or abuse would never happen to them. 59% of interviewed young people think that meeting new people online is either somewhat or very important to them. These results reveal a considerable potential for risky online conduct of children and teenagers, stemming from their overconfidence that nothing bad can happen to them in the virtual world, because they are aware of the risks and know how to avoid them¹⁸⁴.

Another recent study conducted by the **Global Kids Online** established that on average, 8 in 10 children access the internet on mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. This enhances the development of their technical skills and helps them to become active and independent internet users, but also makes them more exposed to risks like sexual or other harmful or hurtful online content, internet scams, pop ups or harassment. At the same time, help and support from their parents or other cares might not be immediately available¹⁸⁵.



About 29 per cent of youth worldwide – around 346 million individuals – are not online. Youth (ages 15–24) is the most connected age group. Worldwide, 71 per cent are online compared with 48 per cent of the total population. Nearly one third of all youth worldwide – around 346 million 15–24-year-olds – are not online¹⁸⁶.

AFRICA

African youth are the least connected¹⁸⁷. Around 60 per cent are not online, compared with just 4 per cent in Europe. In Africa, 3 out of 5 youth (aged 15 to 24) are offline; in Europe, the proportion is just 1 in 25. Nearly 9 out of 10 of the young people (aged 15–24) currently not using the internet live in Africa or Asia and the Pacific. In 2017, Africa was also the region with the highest proportion of non-users among 15-24-year-olds – the population segment often considered to be highly connected¹⁸⁸. These disparities in access are particularly striking in some low-income countries. In Bangladesh and Zimbabwe, fewer than 1 in 20 children under 15 uses the internet¹⁸⁹. For children in these countries, challenges of poor-quality connectivity are likely compounded by high data costs – most of the countries with the least affordable mobile-broadband prices are also among the least developed countries in Africa and Asia and the Pacific¹⁹⁰. Although scarce, available data on the urban-rural digital divide for young people (15–24 years old) in countries such as Cameroon, Malawi and Zimbabwe also show marked disparities, with rural youth in these countries experiencing very low levels of connectivity. Africa will see its youth population almost double from 240 million in 2016 to 460 million in 2050.

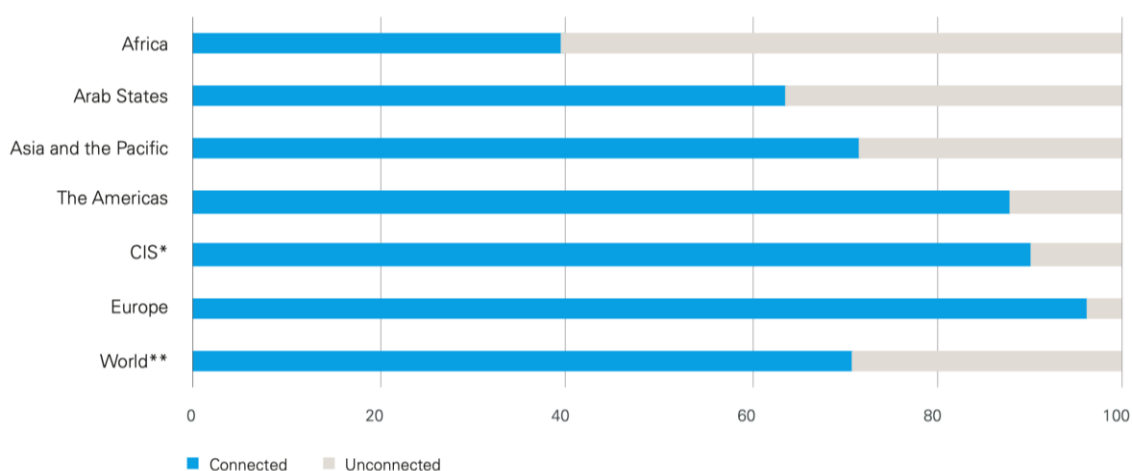


Figure 17. Percentage of 15-24-year-olds who are non-internet users by region, 2017¹⁹¹



ASIA

China

In mainland China, cyberbullying has not yet received adequate scholarly attention. A study investigating risk factors for cyberbullying sampled 1,438 high school students from central China. The data showed that 34.84% had participated in bullying and 56.88% had been bullied online¹⁹². A survey of cyberbullying in Hong Kong selected 48 of 7,654 primary to high school students who were classified as potential cyberbullying aggressors. 31 out of 48 students stated that they hardly participated in cyber-attacks. It is common among high school students (28 out of 36 students) to participate in social media platforms; 58% admitted to changing someone's nickname, 56.3% humiliating, 54.2% making fun of someone and 54.2% spreading rumors. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups interviewed 1,820 teenagers, 17.5% of whom reported experiencing cyberbullying. This includes insults, abuse and posting personal photos on social media without permission.

Japan

In Japan, 17% of youth between the ages of 8 and 17 have been victims of online bullying. The number shows that online bullying is a serious problem in Japan. Teenagers who spend more than 10 hours a week on the Internet are more likely to be the target of online bullying, although only 28% of survey participants understand what cyberbullying is. However, they know the seriousness of the problem; 63% of students surveyed are worried about becoming a victim of cyberbullying. As teenagers socialize online through social networks, they become easy targets for cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can happen via email, text message, chat rooms, and social networking websites. Some cyberbullies create websites or blogs to post images of the victim, post personal information, gossip about the victim, express why they hate them, manipulate followers' opinions for validation, and send direct links to "audience" to empathize with the bullying process. Much of cyberbullying is an act of relational aggression that involves alienating the victim from peers through gossip or ostracism. This type of attack can easily be launched through text messages or other online activities. Even when they leave school, the attacks don't stop. Cyberbullying can cause a serious psychological impact on victims. They often feel anxious, nervous, tired and depressed. Other examples of negative psychological trauma include loss of confidence as a result of social isolation from their classmates or friends.



EUROPE

European Union

The new European strategy for a Better Internet for Kids (BIK+ strategy), adopted in May 2022, emphasizes the need to pay careful attention to children with special or specific needs, or from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. In the new strategy, the European Commission sets out clear priorities for young people with a range of vulnerabilities, with the overarching aim to ensure that no one is left behind, and that all children and young people have a voice when it comes to matters in the digital sphere¹⁹³.

The new European strategy for a Better Internet for Kids sets out the vision for a Digital Decade for children and young people, and works for a safer, better online experience including accessible, age-appropriate and informative online content and services that are in children's best interests¹⁹⁴.



Figure 18. Building a better internet for you¹⁹⁵



The strategy is based on three key pillars:

1. **Ensuring safe digital experiences:** protecting children and young people from harmful and online content, conduct, and online risks and improving their well-being in an age-appropriate digital environment. The European Commission will focus on EU code for age-appropriate design, a European standard on online age verification, and on the support of reporting systems of illegal and harmful content, as well as cyberbullying.
2. **Digital empowerment:** children and young people must acquire the necessary skills and competences to make informed choices and express themselves in the digital environment safely and responsibly. This will be achieved through media literacy campaigns and teaching modules targeted at children, teachers and parents via the network of Safer Internet Centers (SICs).
3. **Active participation:** children and young people must be respected by giving them a say in the digital environment, with more child-led activities to foster innovative and creative safe digital experiences. This will be achieved by supporting more experienced children teaching their peers about online opportunities and risks, and by organizing a child-led evaluation of the strategy every two years.

Finland

Sourander et al. (2010) conducted a population-based cross-sectional study conducted in Finland. The authors of this study took the self-reports of 2,215 Finnish adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 about cyberbullying and cybervictimization in the previous six months. Of the total sample, 4.8% were found to be victims of malicious social media activity, 7.4% were victims of cyberbullying, and 5.4% were victims of cyberbullying only.

The authors of this study were able to conclude that cyberbullying, as well as cybervictimization, is associated not only with psychiatric but also with psychosomatic problems. Many adolescents in the study reported headaches or trouble sleeping. The authors believe their results indicate a greater need for new ideas about how to prevent cyberbullying and what to do when it happens. Obviously, this is a worldwide problem that needs to be taken seriously¹⁹⁶.



France

EU Kids Online II is a project on "Improving knowledge about European children's use, risk and safety online". Its aim is to improve knowledge of the experiences and practices of European children and parents regarding risky and safer use of the Internet and new online technologies, in order to inform national and international stakeholders to promote a safer online environment. Taking a child-centered, comparative, critical and contextual approach, Kids Online II developed and conducted a large quantitative study of 9–16-year-olds' experiences of online risks in 25 European countries. The findings were systematically compared with their parents' perceptions and practices and disseminated through a series of reports and presentations¹⁹⁷.

A report on the risks and safety of young people on the Internet in France shows that the role of parents in the country is large and they are the first source that young people turn to for help and advice on the Internet.

According to the research carried out on the project, the following results are obtained:

What do 9–16-year-olds in France say about how they access the internet? In France, compared to the European average, more children go online in the living room or in a public place at home (79% vs. 62%). The second most common place is at school or college (52%), but to a lesser extent than the European average, as at European level school is the most common place where children connect (63%). Four in ten children (41%) go online in the bedroom or another private room, but there are also many who say they go online at a friend's house (49%), making their activity more difficult for monitoring. For Europe as a whole, girls and boys have similar levels of internet access in their own bedroom with a slightly higher percentage of boys (42% vs. 39%). 13% of children go online with a handheld device and 21% with a mobile phone, which is less than the European average. Children in France access the internet from a similar range of devices than the European average. Children aged 9–16 had an average age of 9 when they used the Internet for the first time and did not differ from the European average. Six out of ten children access the Internet daily or almost daily (58%), 36% use it once or twice a week, 7% once or twice a month. Girls go online more often than boys (60% vs. 55%), and daily use is much more common among older children (87%). The average time spent online by 9–16-year-olds is just two hours a day (118 minutes), higher than the European average (88 minutes) with a longer time spent by children (135 minutes a day versus 110 - about three hours more per week).



Risk taking

In France, children report significantly more internet contact than in most other European countries. Surprisingly, quite a few children under the age of 13 say they have a social media profile with 13% of primary school children and 37% of 11–12-year-olds in junior high being on social media. Although these rates are lower than the European average, this is problematic because it is illegal and poses a certain risk of cyberbullying.

- Children in France have lower indicators of maintaining the complete privacy of their social network (34% versus 43% on average for Europe).
- Finding new friends was the most common activity cited by children and one third of children said they had added strangers as friends (43%). 12% of participants sent a photo or video of themselves to someone they had never met before.

Germany

In Germany, filtering certain online content is something that the majority of parents are behind. Many German mobile operators have created software dedicated to parental control and at the same time signed various codes related to the protection of mobile browsing. Emphasis is placed on the various reporting tools that can be used to respond to inappropriate content for children. Such tools should be as simple as possible so that they can be used by both parents and children. The unique position in which IT companies and Internet providers find themselves in developing Internet security and the help they can provide to their customers is also emphasized. Some IT companies have special software for parents to educate them about the dangers of the Internet or help them monitor their children's online activity.

The burden of preventive measures against cyberbullying is increasing, as much of it is carried out by children or teenagers, and therefore it is important in schools to work on this problem and encourage more time for children today, so as not to turned into criminals tomorrow. Some Member States adopt comprehensive national strategies for the safety of children on the Internet, others rely on the institution of the ombudsman for the protection of children's rights (Hungary and Poland) or special bodies have been created that deal with the protection of young people on the Internet and cooperate closely with the authorities respectively, networks, mobile operators and internet providers.



In the EU, non-governmental organizations play a major role, often participating in the formation of government policies and helping to strengthen international cooperation on internet safety.

Very useful is the experience of the InHope network, an association of various non-governmental organizations that keep hotlines open, the ultimate goal of which is to eliminate sexual harassment of children on the Internet and sites with such content. The network operates both at EU level and globally¹⁹⁸.

Another similar source is the so-called Insafe network, organizer of Safer Internet Day, which takes place every February and consists of various activities promoting the safety of young people on the Internet. In the Insafe network, NGOs, educational institutions, law enforcement agencies, business organizations and parents collaborate. The European Parliament is aware of the dangers that the online environment holds for children and the website In Hope emphasizes the fact that over 80% of victims in cyberspace are children under the age of 10.

Ireland

The Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) pilot study was conducted in eight post-primary schools in Ireland, including 318 students aged 15-18 years. 59% are boys and 41% are girls. Participation in this study was voluntary for students and consent was obtained from parents, students, and the school itself. This survey was anonymous and confidential and took 40 minutes to complete. It asks questions about traditional forms of bullying as well as cyberbullying, risk-taking behavior, and self-reported health and life satisfaction. 66% of students say they have never been bullied, 14% have been victims of traditional forms of bullying, 10% have been victims of cyberbullying, and the remaining 10% have been victims of both traditional forms of bullying and cyberbullying. Boys most often said they were victims of traditional forms of bullying, and girls mostly said they were victims of both traditional forms of bullying and cyberbullying. 20% of students in this study said they had been cyberbullied, indicating that cyberbullying is on the rise. Arrow DIT claims 23% of 9–16-year-olds in Ireland have been bullied online or offline, compared to 19% in Europe. Although online bullying in Ireland stands at 4% according to Arrow DIT, this is lower than the European average of 6% and half that of the UK, where 8% reported being cyberbullied¹⁹⁹.



Latvia

"Net Safe Project"²⁰⁰, which recommends that training young people on Internet safety should be combined with activities that are attractive to them. The Net-Safe project runs from 1 September 2006 to 31 September 2008. The main objective of the Net-Safe project is to facilitate the safer use of information and communication technologies (ICT). To achieve this, it is important that society, public authorities, industry and Internet service providers cooperate to improve the Internet in terms of quality and safety.

Slovakia

Slovakia presents an interesting example as one of the main risks in social networks, a risk illustrated by the fact that 81% of Slovak teenagers use Facebook every day. In social networks, young people share too much personal information, and for this purpose, the Internet portal "Safer Internet" was created, also focused on the elimination of threats to online security. The site is dedicated to children and parents and contains various practical tips on how to deal with and avoid problems on the Internet. According to the authors of this website, posting real name or surname, home/school address and posting photos may lead to physical attacks and harassment. Attention is paid to "statuses" in social networks, describing the feelings and activities of young users, such as preparing luggage for a holiday, waiting at an airport, arriving at a designated holiday destination. As a result, many cases of home burglaries have been reported after such information was shared online. The Slovakian experience also indicates that parents should be the main source of information, and their lack of interest in the issue of online safety itself poses a risk to their children²⁰¹.

Slovenia

New Slovenian study shows that content on social networks has a strong influence on the well-being of young people. On the internet, adolescents are exposed to unrealistic beauty standards, idealized and sexualized images of people and their lifestyles. Failure to live up to such beauty standards imposed by unattainable and often graphically altered pictures online can have a negative impact on the well-being and mental health of young people, according to a new study conducted by the Slovenian Safer Internet Centre. Adolescence is indeed



a vulnerable period of life for young people, especially when it comes to accepting their bodies and developing self-esteem. They can easily become obsessed with their appearance, feel dissatisfied with their bodies, have feelings of inferiority, feel pressured, frustrated and tense. All of this was reported by adolescents themselves in a survey conducted in February and March 2022 by the Slovenian awareness center Safe.si²⁰² (Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana) as part of the activities for Safer internet Day. It included pupils from the last three grades of primary school, and secondary school students.

Teenagers compare their bodies with images online

The survey found that 45 per cent of young people, already in primary school, compare their face and body with the seemingly perfect images of influencers and celebrities online, and are therefore dissatisfied with their appearance. Almost 18 per cent state they do this frequently. In secondary school, the proportion is even higher: 59 per cent of teenagers compare themselves to influencers and almost a quarter (23 per cent) of them do this frequently. When looking at pictures of their friends online, 47% per cent of primary school teens and 61 per cent of secondary school teens sometimes or oftentimes feel that others' lives are better than their own. It is therefore not surprising that 31 per cent of primary school teenagers sometimes (12 per cent state they do it often) apply filters and other enhancements to a picture taken with their mobile phone to make them look as good as possible. The percentages are similar for secondary school students.

Unrealistic and graphically altered images on the internet should be labelled

It is worrying that as many as a third (33 per cent) of secondary school girls are thinking about improving their appearance through surgery, compared to a quarter (24 per cent) of girls in the last three grades of primary school. The situation is slightly different for boys: 10 per cent of primary school boys considered changing their appearance, compared to only 6 per cent in secondary school. More than half of the surveyed teenagers (52 per cent in the last three years of primary school and 58 per cent in secondary school) agree with the statement that pictures of influencers and celebrities are often unrealistic and altered to look perfect and should therefore be labelled as such. This way, young people would not feel bad for not having such looks themselves, knowing those pictures are not real.



Exclusion from social groups among peers on the internet is the most common reason for young people to feel unwell

The survey results show that the most negative impact on teenagers' well-being in both primary and secondary school is caused by situations online where they feel excluded from groups of peers or are victims of online violence. 53 per cent of teens in primary school and 57 per cent of teens in secondary school feel bad when they are excluded from a private group of classmates on a social networking site or app. When someone makes fun of them online, 42 per cent of primary school teens and 51 per cent of secondary school teens feel awful. Almost half (45 per cent of primary school teenagers and 49 per cent of secondary school students) feel uncomfortable when they see pictures online of a party they were not invited to. If someone does not reply for a long time to a message they have sent, 44 per cent of primary school teenagers and 42 per cent of secondary school teenagers feel bad. However, when they receive a negative comment on something they posted online, the percentage of those who feel bad is 31 per cent of primary school teenagers and 38 per cent of secondary school teenagers. In the case no one likes their posts online, 28 per cent of primary school teenagers and 36 per cent of secondary school teenagers feel sad. Another interesting instance is how looking at pictures from holidays and trips taken by classmates affects teenagers' well-being. The proportion of teenagers who feel bad in this situation and the proportion who feel good are equal. About two-fifths of respondents in primary and secondary school are affected one way or the other, while the other three-fifths state they are not affected at all.

The proportion of negative experiences increases with age

The age of the respondents also highlights the impact the internet has on their well-being. There is a big difference by age with regards to sleep deprivation caused by internet use. While only 37 per cent of seventh graders reported this in the survey, it is 44 per cent for eighth graders, 54 per cent for ninth graders and 64 per cent for high school students. Similar percentages were observed with the level of agreement with the statement *“People are ruder and meaner to each other on the internet than they are in face-to-face conversations”*. In seventh grade, 42 per cent of pupils agree, compared to 56 per cent in eighth grade, 60 per cent in ninth grade and 67 per cent in secondary school. The perception that peer pressure is particularly high on the internet also increases as teenagers get older. Less than a fifth of pupils (17 per cent) in seventh grade feel that pressure, compared to 28 per cent in eighth grade, a third (33 per cent)



in ninth grade and 36 per cent in secondary school. The survey was conducted as part of Safer Internet Day (SID) 2022 activities by the [Safe.si](https://www.safe.si) awareness raising center, which is part of the Centre for Social Informatics at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. The survey took place in February and March 2022 and was part of the SID month activity package for primary and secondary schools. The package was available to teachers and educators who wanted to carry out an activity with their pupils or students on the topic of online safety. 486 primary school pupils and 246 secondary school students participated in the survey²⁰³.

Sweden

"Little kids and media 2023" is a report on the media habits of kids aged 0-8. It is one of three reports in the series "Kids and Media" based on Sweden's largest survey on children's media habits and attitudes. This survey is carried out every second year. The results show that almost all children have access to tv, but many also have access to mobile phones and tablets. They commonly share all of these with other family members. From the age of 2 it is increasingly common to have a mobile and tablet of one's own. The combined access to digital devices has not increased in total, because the access to computers has decreased slightly. On a daily basis, the tablet is the most used digital device in age groups 2-4 and 5-8, and the mobile is the most used at age 0-1. Note that this mobile use among such small children is something that most likely is done together with a parent or simply that the mobile is used as a toy. The use of social media is limited among small children, but 16 % of 5–8-year-olds spend time with friends online at least once a week. The proportion of kids that use media devices more than 3 hours has not increased since the survey made in 2018. In the age group 5-8 1% use computers, 5 % tablets and 3 % mobile phones 3 hours or more an ordinary day²⁰⁴.

The survey includes children aged 9-18 years and the findings are presented for three age groups: 9-12-, 13-16- and 17–18-year-olds. The results indicated that²⁰⁵:

- From the age of 9, a majority of children in Sweden now have a mobile phone. Most children, 12 years or older, use it every day and it is the most common daily media activity.
- The tendency to read less books and newspapers has stopped with this year's survey and reading has increased slightly in all age groups.



- It is more common to see friends every day online than offline.
- Media related conflicts within the family is more often about time consumed than about the content or the children's choice of activity online.
- Among teenagers, it is common that the mobile is used during the night. The use during night-time increases with age. More than 25 % of 17–18-year-olds use their phone every night and 60 % once a week. The most common activity online during the nights is watching social media.

United Kingdom

In the UK, young people's views on internet safety are being taken seriously, informing policies that develop in this area and the specific issues that may arise. It focuses on the role that schools and universities have in making children and young people aware of internet safety issues and has created a dedicated site with practical advice for organizations other than schools and universities that work with young people.

In many European schools, the online safety curriculum is tailored to the age of the students. In the UK, many children are invited to online risk and countermeasures forums to have their say, ie. they are seen as an active stakeholder. Young people who have successfully completed Internet safety training are attracted to work with their peers who are not yet familiar with these issues.

USA

Girls and boys appear to be susceptible to the negative effects of social media use at different ages, according to a study that suggests teenagers have different levels of vulnerability to technology depending on their biological sex. Like many adults, most American teenagers have a close relationship with their mobile devices. Half of children in the United States own a smartphone by age 11, and nearly 9 out of 10 teenagers have their own device. As social media use by teenagers has increased, so have levels of depression and anxiety.

To look at the link between teenagers' use of social media and their 'life satisfaction', researchers from the University of Cambridge surveyed 84,000 people in Britain aged between 10 and 80, including more than 17,000 young people and teenagers. When they analyzed the responses, they found two



different developmental levels when intensive use of social networks reduced life satisfaction: ages 11 to 13 for girls and 14 to 15 for boys. The results suggest that sensitivity to social network use may be related to developmental or hormonal changes around puberty, which occurs later in boys than in girls. The relationship between social media use and mental well-being is clearly very complex.

The researchers also found that social networking use predicted lower life satisfaction at age 19 in both sexes. Although the study authors are not sure why this is the case, it may be that around this age many people go through significant life transitions and may rely more on social networks²⁰⁶.

The risks might be related to how much social media teens use. A 2019 study of more than 6,500 12- to 15-year-olds in the U.S. found that those who spent more than three hours a day using social media might be at heightened risk for mental health problems.

Other studies also have observed links between high levels of social media use and depression or anxiety symptoms. A 2016 study of more than 450 teens found that greater social media use, night-time social media use and emotional investment in social media – such as feeling upset when prevented from logging on – were each linked with worse sleep quality and higher levels of anxiety and depression.

A 2015 study found that social comparison and feedback seeking by teens using social media and cellphones was linked with depressive symptoms. In addition, a small 2013 study found that older adolescents who used social media passively, such as by just viewing others' photos, reported declines in life satisfaction. Those who used social media to interact with others or post their own content didn't experience these declines.

And an older study on the impact of social media on undergraduate college students showed that the longer they used Facebook, the stronger was their belief that others were happier than they were. But the more time the students spent going out with their friends, the less they felt this way²⁰⁷.



AUSTRALIA

The National Survey of the Prevalence of Covert Bullying in Australia (Cross et al., 2009)²⁰⁸ assessed experiences of cyberbullying among 7418 students. The results showed that levels of cyberbullying increased with age, with 4.9% of students in year 4 reporting cyberbullying compared to 7.9% in year nine. Cross et al., (2009) reported that levels of bullying and bullying others were lower but also increased with age. Only 1.2% of 4th graders reported cyberbullying others compared to 5.6% of 9th graders.



V. RISKS YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS – SURVEY PERSPECTIVE

As a project initiative a **“Social Media Risks” survey** amongst young people was conducted in all partnering countries. The target group of respondents was young people between 14 and 29 years old. The selection of the respondents was not based on gender, ethnicity or race. A special questionnaire with 10 questions was developed and implemented in all four countries so there could be a comparability of the results later (see appendix A). For the development of the questionnaire, an analysis of the available literature on Internet security issues was carried out, with special attention being paid to the risks for young people in the age group of 14-29 years. The main risks and threats were identified, which allowed questions to be formulated to identify how young people perceived these risks.

Against the background of rapidly developing trends in social networks and the constant activity of young people to reflect their personal lives in them, the survey in partnering countries is looking for more data about:

- What is the level of awareness, experience and knowledge of young people about the risks in social networks?
- Whether young people manage to distinguish the limit of the assumed risk in social networks?
- Do young people have risky behavior online and/ or offline?
- What are their skills and whether they can adequately protect themselves?
- What are the attitudes, the level of media literacy and critical thinking about the risks in social networks?

In general, the respondents in all partnering countries welcomed the survey provided to them with interest and positive attitude. The filling of the electronic questionnaire did not cause any difficulties because the questions were formulated clearly and considering the age group of the respondents. The respondents treated the filling out with the necessary seriousness and attention.



1. BULGARIA

The survey in Bulgaria was initiated in 2023 by the leading organization of the project - "Follow Me" Association. The sample involved **276 respondents**.

Respondent age characteristics: Around 93% of the respondents were in the age group 14 to 18 years old. The rest of the young people - around 7 % - were in the age group 19-29 years old. The age distribution corresponded to the purpose of the survey.

QUESTION №1: Do you agree that there are risky, rapidly spreading virtual trends (Risky Viral Trend)?

Most of the respondents (around 90%) have answered positively, regardless of their age. The answer to this question gives initial information if young people believe they are familiar with the risks of social networks.

QUESTION №2: Do social networks having a negative effect on the lives and well-being of young people?

The predominant part of the surveyed children and young people (74%) believe that social networks have a negative impact on their lives and their well-being.

QUESTION №3: Do you agree that the risks of social media are the following?

The answers given by the young people allows us to distribute the risks according to their popularity:

Risks in group 1: High popularity (between 70-80% of all the answers):

- Cyberbullying;
- Theft of personal and financial data (phishing);
- Fake news and disinformation;
- Internet addiction;

Risks in group 2: Average popularity (between 50-60% of the answers):

- Interactions and encounters with strangers;
- Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content;
- Negative influence on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention
- Dangerous online challenges and trends;
- Negative impact on self-esteem and worth;



Risks in group 3: Low popularity (around 30% of the answers):

- Isolation;
- Bad role models and influencers;
- Distortion of the value system.

Considering the mentioned risks as known to the surveyed youth, it is found that they are aware of the most mainstream ones and do not know about some risks that can harm them, such as: isolation, bad role models and influencers, Distortion of the value system.

QUESTION №4: If you wish, add risks that are not included among the listed...

Around 35% of the respondents have answered that there are no other risks, besides those mentioned in the questionnaire; 30% have refused to answer and the rest of the respondents (around 35%) have not answered on the question at all. It is striking that the young people surveyed are not aware of risks other than those mentioned in the questionnaire and no additional risks are described by young people as a result. This suggests that their answers on the previous question are based mainly on bad experience - their own or of their friends and relatives. The lack of knowledge about risks beyond those listed in the questionnaire suggests low awareness, which in turn means – higher risk for the young people in social networks.

QUESTION №5: Have you fallen victim to the listed risks?

Most of the respondents (58%) answer negatively to the question and denied that they have been exposed to risks on social networks. Unfortunately, around 30% of the surveyed children and young people have answered positively that they have suffered from risks as users of social networks. Around 12% were witnesses and observers of such risk exposure among their friends and acquaintances. The percentage of victims of the risks, associated to social networks is high enough to focus on the safety of young people on the Internet and attention to all the possible risks and harms.

QUESTION №6: Please indicate which of the risks you were a victim of and explain the negative impact on your well-being?

Most noted risks, related to social networks among youth are: Addiction, Cyberbullying and low self-esteem. Addiction in the survey is described as too much time spent on social networks and therefore – low achievements at school.



Cyberbullying is also described as aggressive messages and behavior on social networks that undermine the victim's prestige and self-esteem, respectively leading to the risk of anger problems and aggressive behavior as a response. The answers and explanations given suggest that children and young people are aware of the harmful influence of online trends and can define some of the consequences.

QUESTION №7: Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?

Around 74% of the children and young people answered that they believe that they are familiar with the methods of protection against risks in social networks. Around 26% have admitted that they are not aware about the methods for protection. If we make a comparison with the answers to question №4 where the respondents had to point out what the other risks in social networks are and internet, we can conclude that there is a serious lack of knowledge and critical thinking among the surveyed. According to the literature overview there is low awareness, low media literacy and not well-developed critical thinking among children and young people. Main reason is they don't have access to adequate information about how to protect themselves and which methods are working. Safety of young people on the Internet is based entirely on recommendations and advice from friends, but not on professional intervention and training, which in this case is strongly recommended to prevent risky behavior.

QUESTION №8: Share the methods you are familiar with:

An answer to this question was given by 202 out of a total of 276 respondents, or about 73% of the surveyed. About half of them (48% or 97 respondents) answered that they are not familiar with prevention methods against the risks that social networks and the Internet bring. Specific answers were given by 105 respondents or 52% of the surveyed. It is important to note that most probably the respondents who did not answer this question at all, are also not familiar with prevention methods. Thus, the result changes to 62% survey participants who have no knowledge about Internet safety methods and 38% who gave a specific answer about the methods they know. The distribution of the answers given according to the number of methods indicated is also interesting: 63 children (65%) indicate only one method (usually protecting personal data, using strong passwords for social networks, profile blocking, avoiding communication with strangers and sharing real data), and 32 children (35%) indicated two



methods. Responses with more than two methods are missing, indicating low media literacy of the surveyed children and young people regarding internet safety. There are answers that present ignoring the problem as a method of protection, as well as blocking an account as a common measure to deal with harassment on social networks. If children and young people rely only on self-training, values and perceptions of the dangers of the Internet and social networks could be clouded by incorrect and inaccurate information.

QUESTION №9: Would you found a social media risk prevention methodology useful?

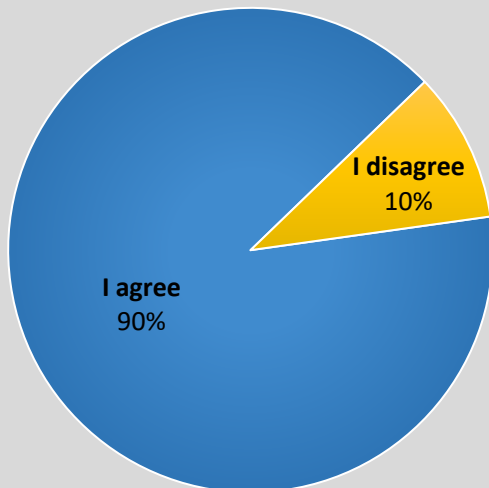
Around 78% of children and young people surveyed agree with the usefulness of the Methodology for risk prevention in social networks, which aims to teach young people how to protect themselves and how to help their peers. The introduction of such methodology would be useful for internet active youth, for their parents and teachers, because professional and fully formed information can best prepare and build awareness of socially responsible behavior in social networks.

Below are presented diagrams with visual representation of the data from the survey in Bulgaria:

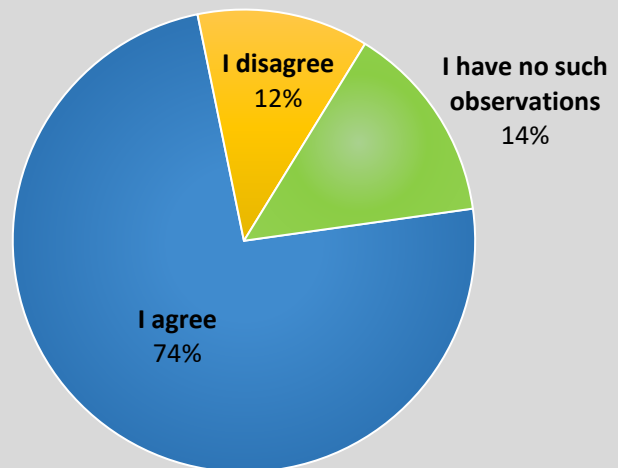


VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF SURVEY RESULTS IN BULGARIA:

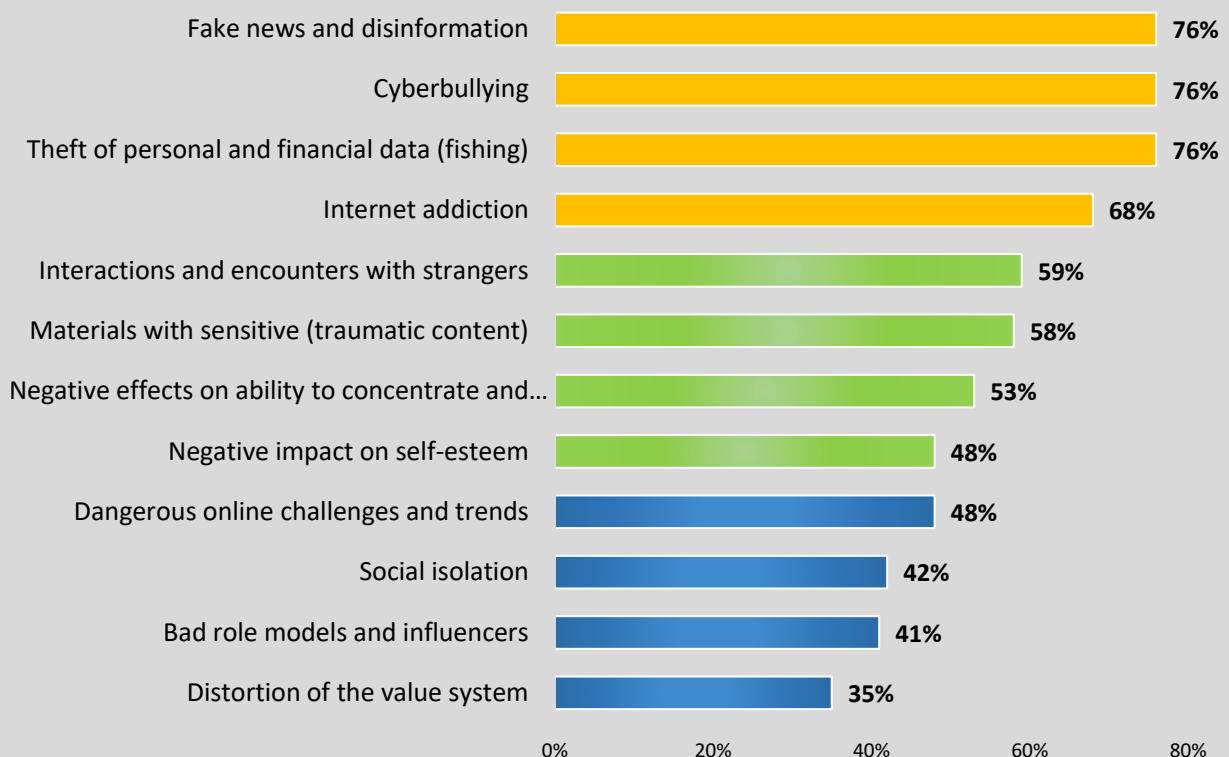
1. Do you agree that there are risky, fast-spreading virtual trends (risky viral trends)?



2. Do social networks have a negative impact on the lives and well-being of young people?

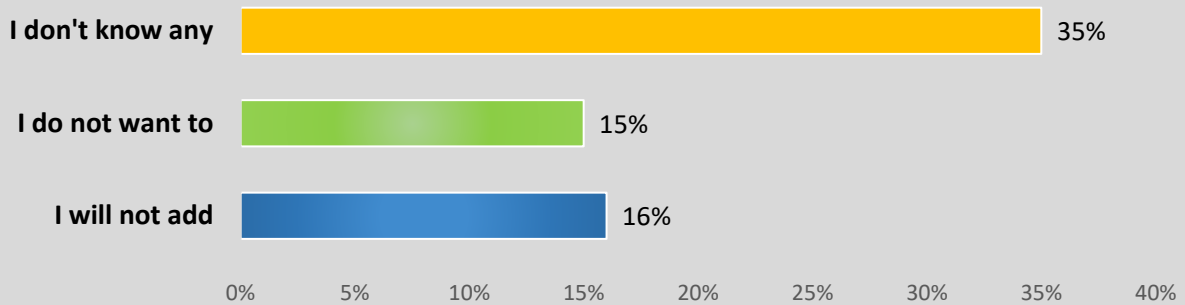


3. Do you agree that the risks in social networks are the following...?

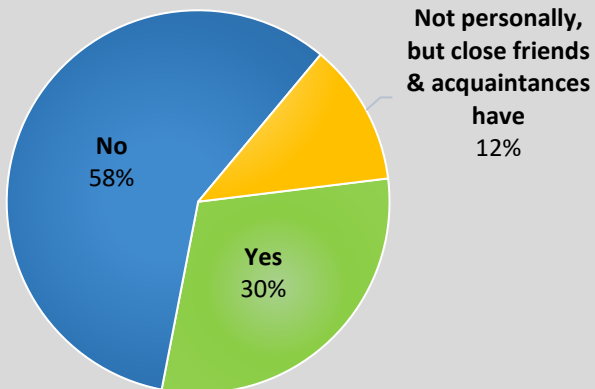




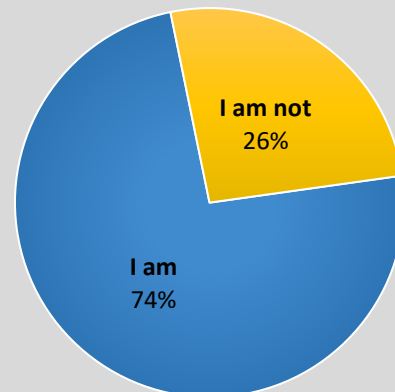
4. If you wish, add risks that are not listed



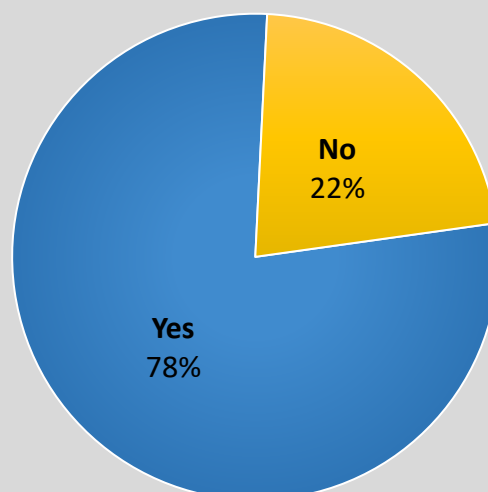
5. Have you fallen victim to any of the listed risks?



7. Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?



9. Would you find a social media risk prevention methodology useful?





2. NORTH MACEDONIA

The survey in North Macedonia was initiated in 2023 by the University “Mother Teresa” in Skopje, North Macedonia – project partner. The sample involved **31 respondents**.

Respondents age characteristics: The Social Media Risks Survey involved 30 respondents between the ages of 14 and 29, of both sexes, and the range of respondents was not influenced by gender, race, ethnicity or education. Around 77% of the respondents were in the age group 19 to 29 years old. The rest of the young people - around 23 % - were in the age group 14-18 years old.

QUESTION №1: Do you agree that there are risky, rapidly spreading virtual trends (Risky Viral Trend)?

Most of the respondents (around 90%) have answered positively, regardless of their age. The answer to this question gives initial information if young people believe they are familiar with the risks of social networks.

QUESTION №2: Do social networks having a negative effect on the lives and well-being of young people?

The predominant part of the surveyed children and young people (74%) believe that social networks have a negative impact on their lives and their well-being.

QUESTION №3: Do you agree that the risks of social media are the following?

The answers given by the young people allows us to distribute the risks according to their popularity:

Risks in group 1: High popularity (between 70-80% of all the answers):

- Internet addiction;

Risks in group 2: Average popularity (between 50-60% of the answers):

- Bad role models and influencers;
- Cyberbullying;
- Fake news and disinformation;

Risks in group 3: Under average popularity (40-50% of the answers):

- Dangerous online challenges and trends;
- Negative impact on self-esteem and worth;



Risks in group 4: Low average popularity (around 30% of the answers):

- Theft of personal and financial data (phishing);
- Distortion of the value system.
- Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content;
- Negative impact on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention
- Interactions and encounters with strangers;
- Isolation.

Considering the mentioned risks as known to the surveyed youth, it is found that they are aware of the most mainstream ones and do not think that some risks can harm them – like Interactions and encounters with strangers, isolation etc.

QUESTION №4: If you wish, add risks that are not included among the listed...

Most of the respondents have answered that there are not many risks, related to social networks – 23 people; 5 didn't answer at all and only 3 have described a possible risk (over time spent, unnecessary information, sex predators and emotional impact). It is striking that the young people surveyed are not aware of risks other than those mentioned in the questionnaire. This suggests that their answers on the previous question are based mainly on bad experience - their own or of their friends and relatives. The lack of knowledge about risks suggests low awareness, which in turn means – higher risk for the young people in social networks.

QUESTION №5: Have you fallen victim to the listed risks?

Most of the respondents (42%) answer negatively to the question and denied that they have been exposed to risks on social networks. Unfortunately, around 26% of the surveyed children and young people have answered positively that they have suffered from risks as users of social networks. Around 32% were witnesses and observers of such risk exposure among their friends and acquaintances. The percentage of victims of the risks, associated to social networks is high enough to focus on the safety of young people on the Internet and attention to all the possible risks and harms. The presence of risky behavior around youth is a risk.



QUESTION №6: Please indicate which of the risks you were a victim of and explain the negative impact on your well-being?

Most noted risk, related to social networks among youth in North Macedonia is Internet addiction (77% of all the answers). Bad role models and influencers (16%) and cyberbullying (13%) are also mentioned. A relatively small number of answers were given for all the rest of the risks. The answers and explanations given suggest that children and young people are somehow aware of the harmful influence of online trends and can define some of the consequences on their own.

QUESTION №7: Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?

Around 39% of the children and young people answered that they believe that they are familiar with the methods of protection against risks in social networks. Around 61% have admitted that they are not aware about the methods for protection. If we make a comparison with the answers to question №4 where the respondents had to point out what the other risks in social networks and internet are, we can conclude that there is a serious lack of knowledge and critical thinking among the surveyed. According to the literature overview there is low awareness, low media literacy and not well-developed critical thinking among children and young people. Main reason is they don't have access to adequate information about how to protect themselves and which methods are working. Safety of young people on the Internet is based mostly on recommendations and advice from friends, but not on professional intervention and training, which in this case is strongly recommended to prevent risky behavior.

QUESTION №8: Share the methods you are familiar with:

Most of the children and young people have answered that they are not familiar with prevention methods against the risks that social networks and the Internet bring (28 respondents or 90%). A proper answer to this question was given only by 3 out of a total of 31 respondents, or about 10% of the surveyed. The answers included avoiding sharing of personal information, using an anti-virus software, avoiding contacts with strangers and ignoring sensitive content. It is obvious the lack of knowledge about prevention methods among children and young people in the survey. It is a signal that there are not professional trainings available and that they rely mainly on self-training. This is a negative trend because values and



perceptions of the dangers of the Internet and social networks could be clouded by incorrect and inaccurate information.

QUESTION №9: Would you found a social media risk prevention methodology useful?

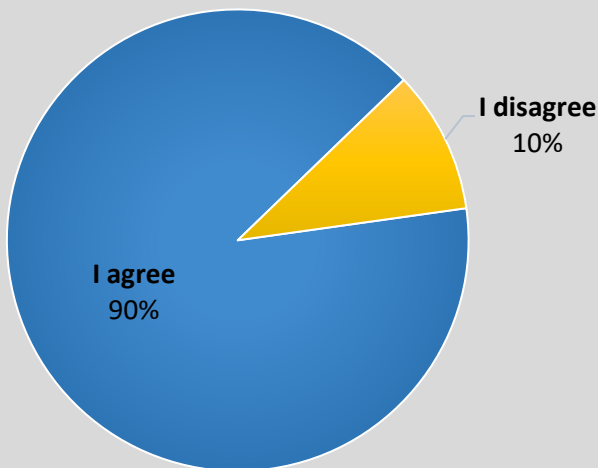
Around 94% of children and young people surveyed agree with the usefulness of the Methodology for risk prevention in social networks, which aims to teach young people how to protect themselves and how to help their peers. The introduction of such methodology would be useful for internet active youth, for their parents and teachers, because professional and fully formed information can best prepare and build awareness of socially responsible behavior in social networks.

Below are presented diagrams with visual representation of the data from the survey in North Macedonia:

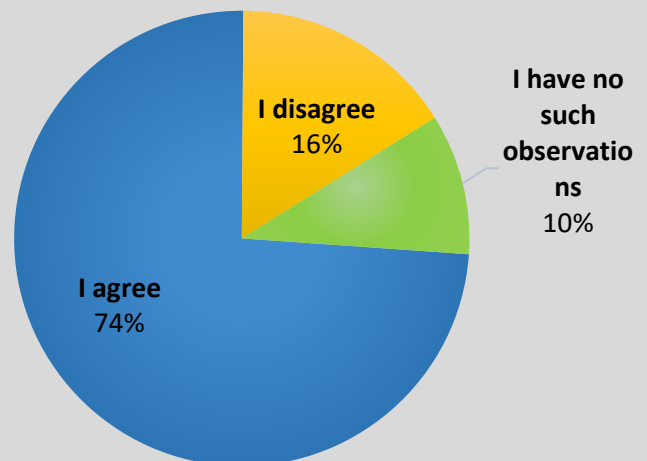


VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF SURVEY RESULTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA:

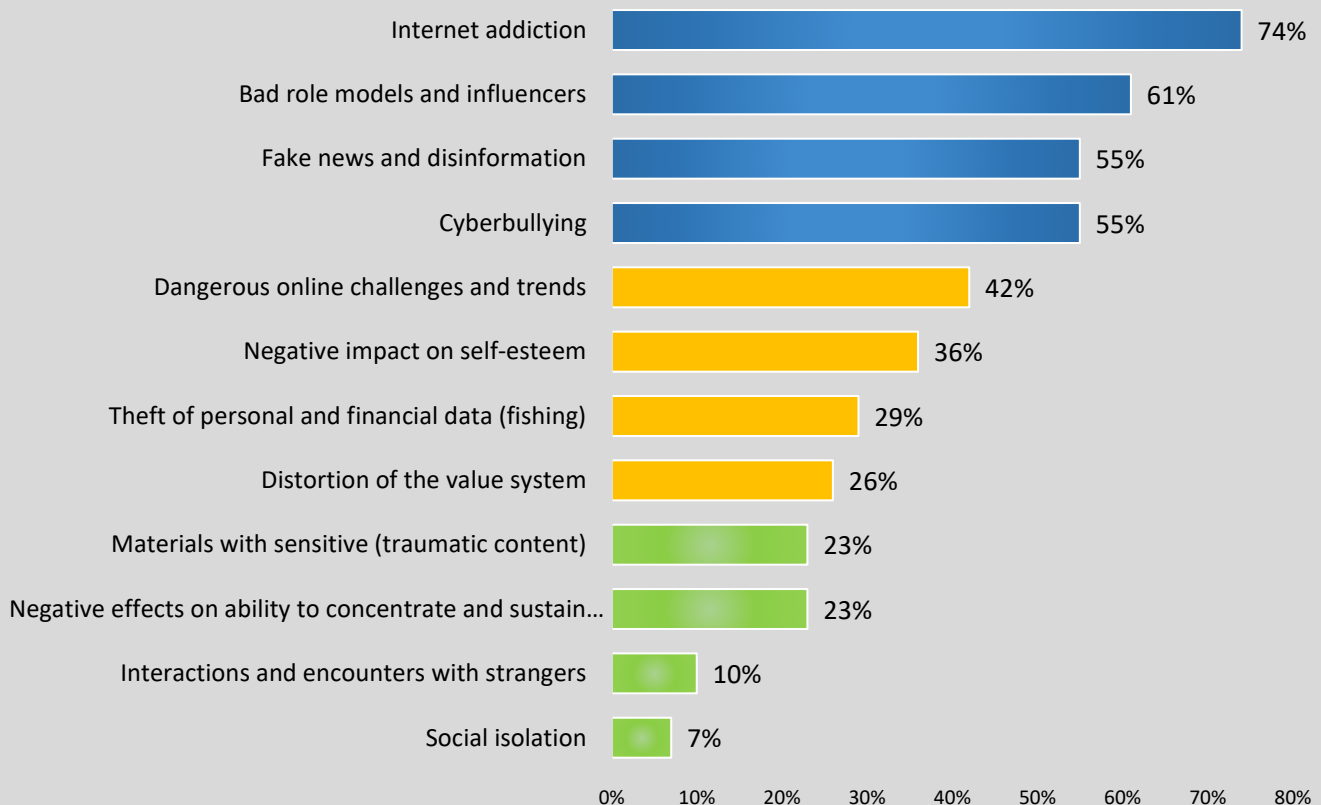
1. Do you agree that there are risky, fast-spreading virtual trends (risky viral trends)?



2. Do social networks have a negative impact on the lives and well-being of young people?

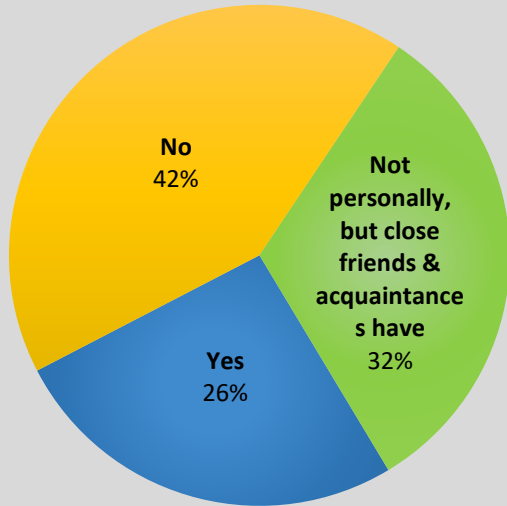


3. Do you agree that the risks in social networks are the following...?

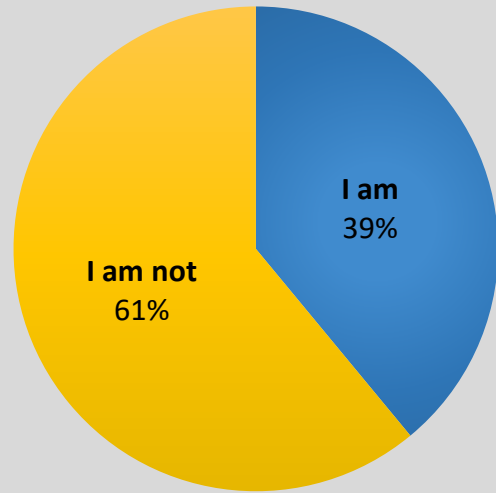




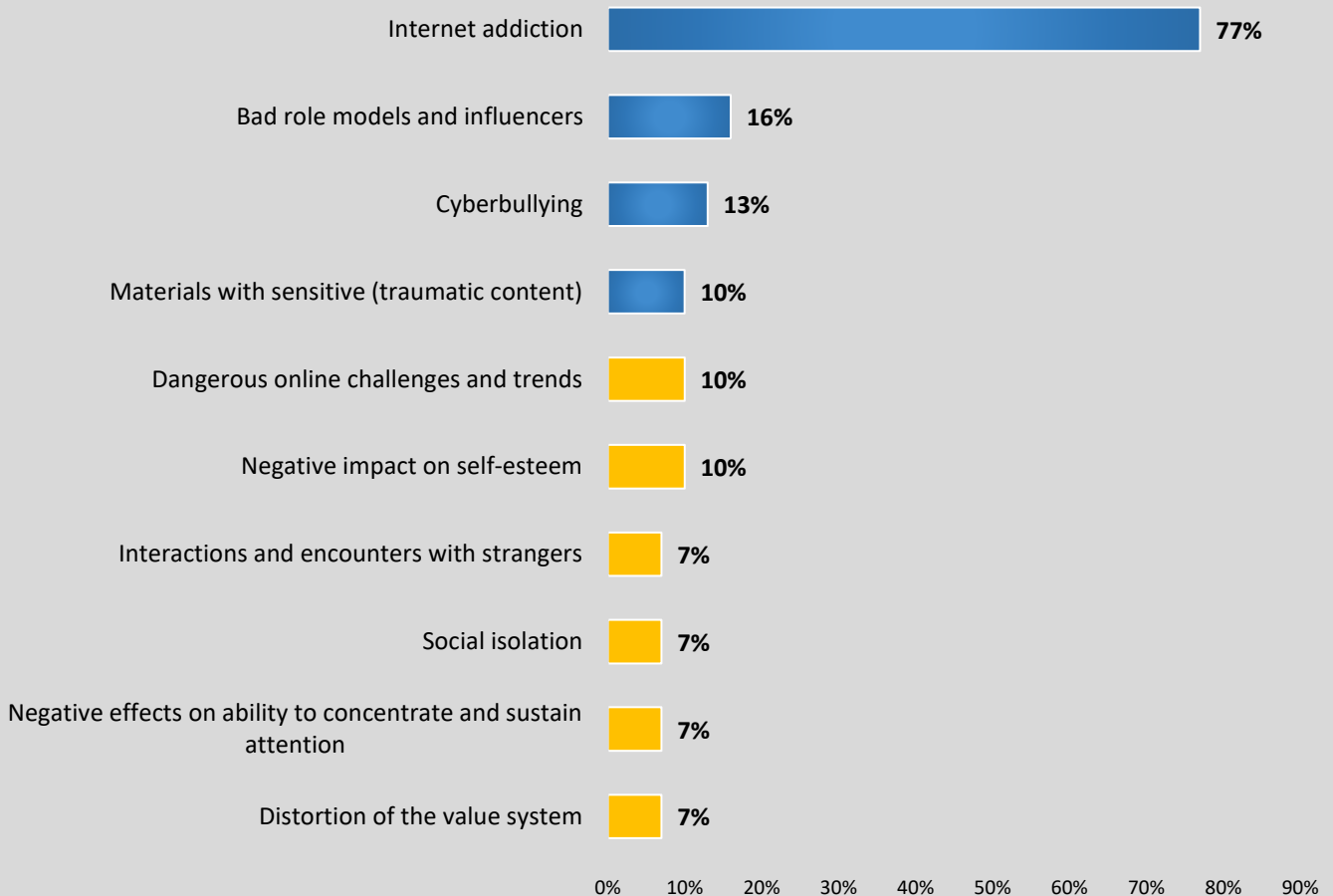
5. Have you fallen victim to any of the listed risks?



7. Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?



6. Please, indicate which of the risks you were a victim of...?





3. POLAND

The survey in Poland was conducted in February and March 2023 by the Urban Forum Association – project partner. The sample included **41 respondents**.

Respondents age and occupation characteristics: The distribution of the respondents by age is balanced – 51% are the surveyed between the ages of 14 and 18, and 49% of the respondents are in the age group 19 to 29 years old. This corresponds to the purpose of the survey, but the relative number of children is still a bit small for serious conclusions. Most of the respondents are studying (70%) and around 30% are working.

QUESTION №1: Do you agree that there are risky, rapidly spreading virtual trends (Risky Viral Trend)?

Most of the respondents (around 85%) have answered positively, regardless of their age. Only 15 % didn't agree with this statement. The answer to this question gives initial information if young people believe they are familiar with the risks of social networks. The result also shows that most young people realize of the risk of social networks.

QUESTION №2: Do social networks having a negative effect on the lives and well-being of young people?

The predominant part of the surveyed children and young people (70%) believe that social networks have a negative impact on their lives and their well-being. Around 10% state that they don't have negative effect and 20 % don't have such observations – this can be translated into a negative answer. Despite the awareness of the negative influence, young people continue to use social networks.

QUESTION №3: Do you agree that the risks of social media are the following?

The answers given by the young people allows us to distribute the risks according to their popularity:

Risks in group 1: High popularity (between 70-80% of all the answers):

- No risks met these criteria;



Risks in group 2: Average popularity (between 50-60% of the answers):

- Interactions and encounters with strangers;
- Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content;
- Bad role models and influencers;
- Internet addiction;

Risks in group 3: Under average popularity (40-50% of the answers):

- Isolation
- Fake news and disinformation;
- Theft of personal and financial data (phishing);

Risks in group 4: Low average popularity (around 30% of the answers):

- Cyberbullying;
- Negative impact on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention
- Dangerous online challenges and trends;
- Distortion of the value system.
- Negative impact on self-esteem and worth;

Considering the mentioned risks as known to the surveyed youth, it is found that they are aware of the most mainstream ones and do not think that some risks can harm them – like dangerous online challenges and trends, Distortion of the value system, Negative impact on self-esteem and worth etc.

QUESTION №4: If you wish, add risks that are not included among the listed...

There were no answers given by the respondents to the question at all. It is striking that the young people surveyed are not aware of risks other than those mentioned in the questionnaire and no additional risks are described as a result. This suggests that their answers on the previous question are based mainly on bad experience - their own or of their friends and relatives. The lack of knowledge about risks beyond those listed in the questionnaire suggests low awareness, which in turn means higher risk for the young people in social networks.

QUESTION №5: Have you fallen victim to the listed risks?

The results showed that over 17 % respondents suffered from the risk and 24,4% indicated that their relatives have been exposed to the risk so altogether nearly 50 % young people have been exposed to the risk due to social networks. Around 59% denied any exposure to the risks, associated to social networks. Still the



percentage of exposure is high enough to focus on the safety of young people on the Internet and attention to all the possible risks and harms.

QUESTION №6: Please indicate which of the risks you were a victim of and explain the negative impact on your well-being?

Most noted risk, related to social networks among youth in Poland is bad role models and influencers (52% of all the answers); materials with sensitive content (48%), isolation (44%); Interactions and encounters with strangers (44%); Fake news and disinformation (35%); Negative impact on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention (26%). A relatively small number of answers were given for all the rest of the risks. The least number of respondents suffered from distortion of the value system. The answers and explanations given suggest that children and young people are somehow aware of the harmful influence of online trends and can define some of the consequences on their own.

QUESTION №7: Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?

Around 70% of the respondents have admitted that they are not aware about the methods for protection. Only around 30% of the children and young people answered that they believe that they are familiar with the methods of protection against risks in social networks. This fact also proves that safety of young people on the Internet is endangered. According to the literature overview there is low awareness, low media literacy and not well-developed critical thinking among children and young people. Main reason is they don't have access to adequate information about how to protect themselves and which methods are working. Safety of young people on the Internet is based mostly on recommendations and advice from friends, but not on professional intervention and training, which in this case is strongly recommended to prevent risky behavior.

QUESTION №8: Share the methods you are familiar with:

The answers to these questions showed that young people are aware of many social media protection methods. Only 4,9% stated that they don't know any methods of protection. Most respondents - 51,2% don't accept friends request from strangers, 39% always check whether they know or have mutual acquaintances with the person who sent them an invitation and 39% also don't post personal information. The least number of respondents (24,4%) don't believe everything posted on the Internet. Some of the answers given include:



- do not open emails from suspicious senders;
- create hard-to-guess passwords;
- log out of social networking sites;
- only download files and programs from trusted sources;
- password changes;
- downloading programmed from certain sites.

QUESTION №9: Would you found a social media risk prevention methodology useful?

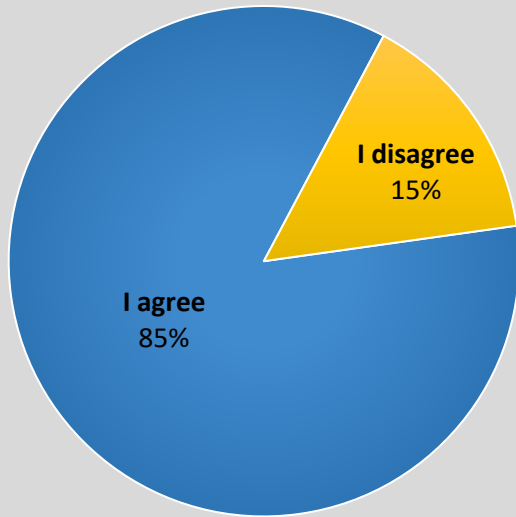
Around 70% of children and young people surveyed agree with the usefulness of the Methodology for risk prevention in social networks, which aims to teach young people how to protect themselves and how to help their peers. The introduction of such methodology would be useful for internet active youth, for their parents and teachers, because professional and fully formed information can best prepare and build awareness of socially responsible behavior in social networks.

Below are presented diagrams with visual representation of the data from the survey in Poland:

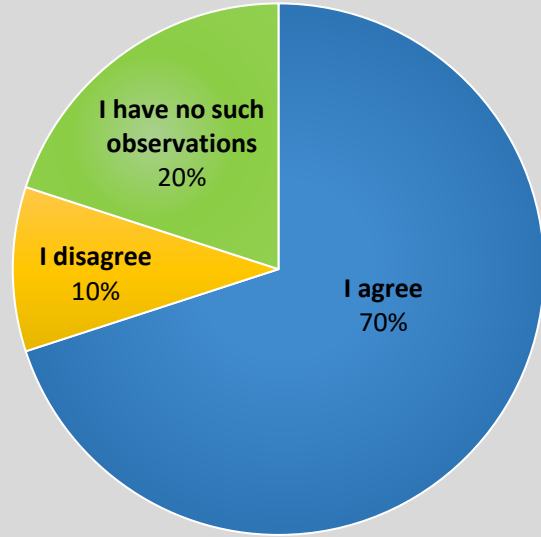


VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DATA FROM THE SURVEY IN POLAND:

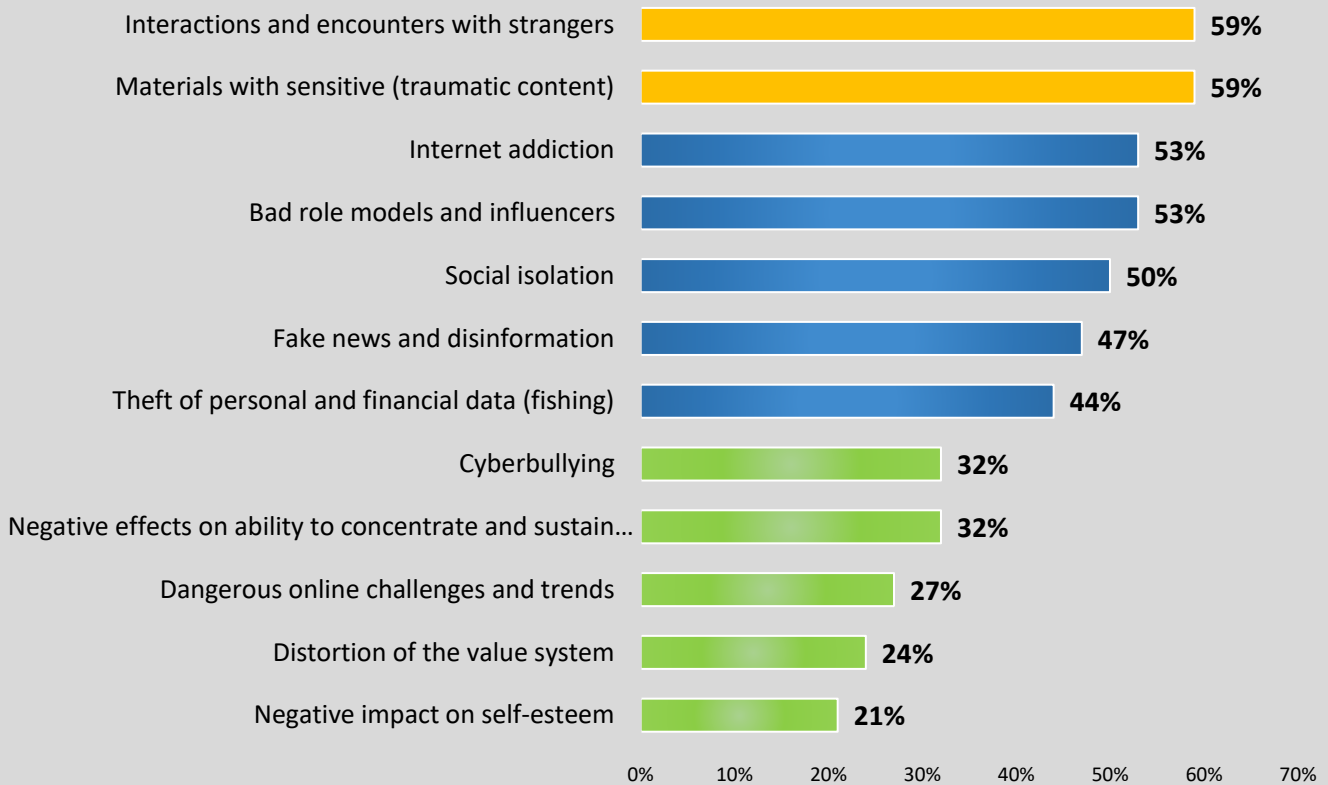
1. Do you agree that there are risky, fast-spreading virtual trends (risky viral trends)?



2. Do social networks have a negative impact on the lives and well-being of young people?

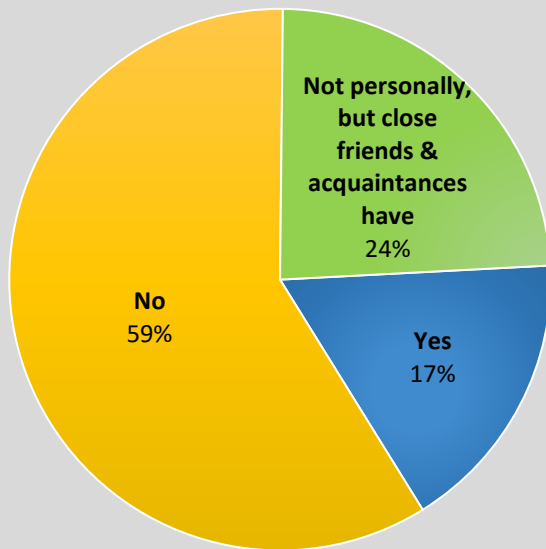


3. Do you agree that the risks in social networks are the following ...?

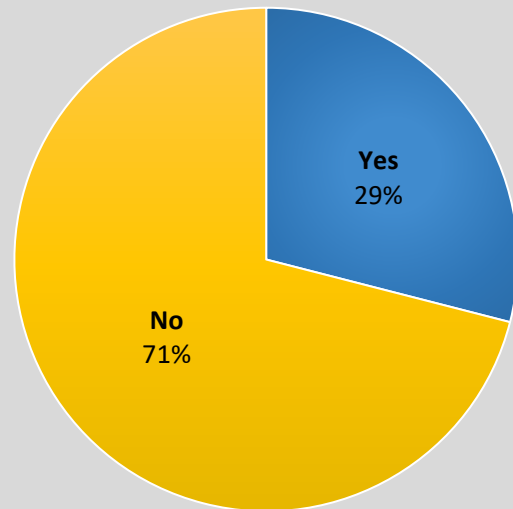




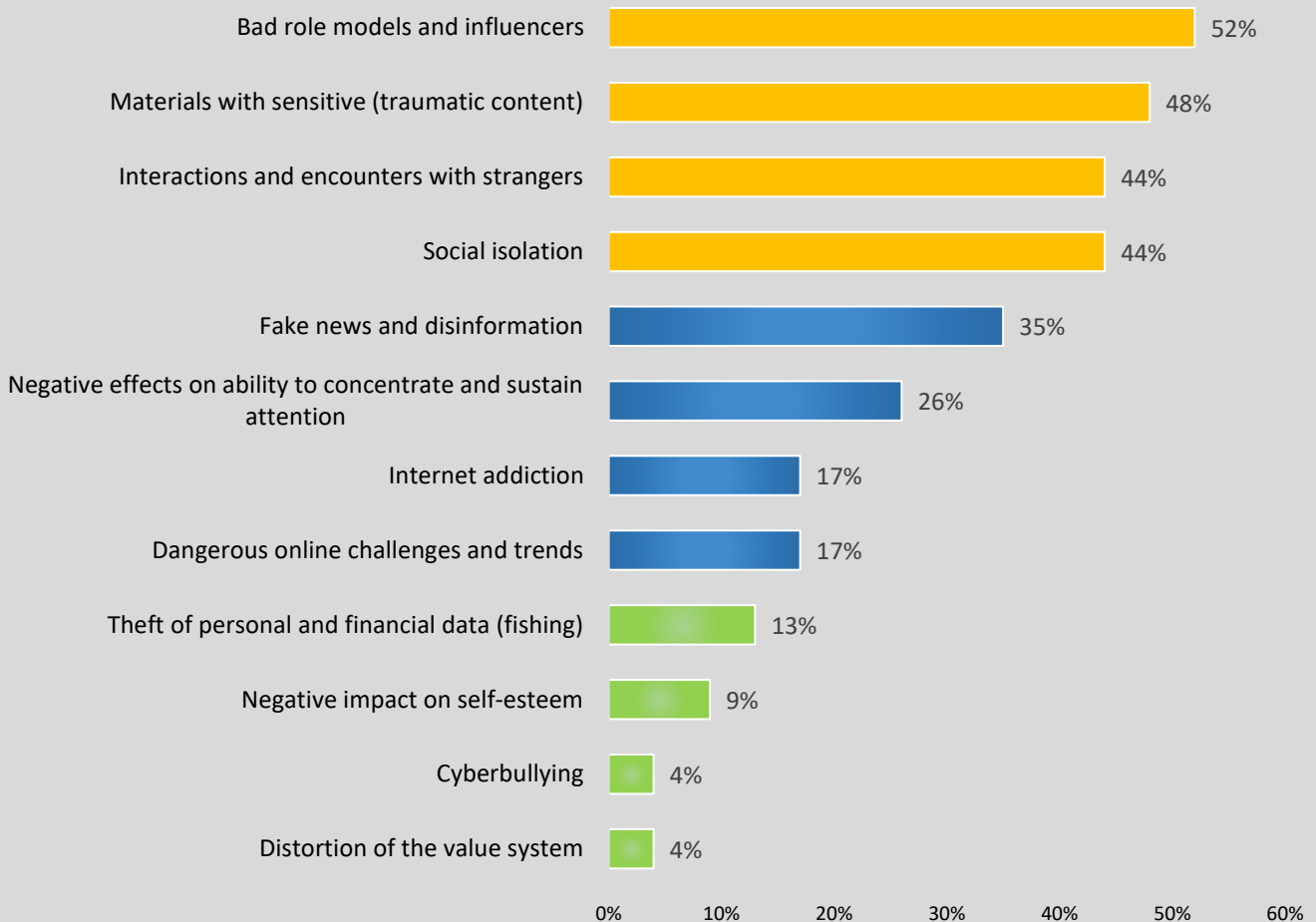
5. Have you fallen victim to any of the listed risks?



7. Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?



6. Please, indicate which of the risks you were a victim of?





4. AUSTRIA

The survey in Austria was initiated in 2023 by the Academy for political education and measures to promote democracy, Austria – a project partner. The sample involved **44 respondents**.

Respondents age characteristics: Around 59% of the respondents are in the age group 14-18 years old. The rest of the young people - around 41 % - are in the age group 19 to 29 years old. The age distribution corresponded to the purpose of the survey, but the relative number of children and young people is still a bit small for serious conclusions.

QUESTION №1: Do you agree that there are risky, rapidly spreading virtual trends (Risky Viral Trend)?

Most of the respondents (around 98%) have answered positively, regardless of their age. The answer to this question gives initial information if young people believe they are familiar with the risks of social networks. However, it is important to note that awareness of the risks does not equate to a full understanding of the implications and the importance of security measures.

QUESTION №2: Do social networks have a negative effect on the lives and well-being of young people?

It is worrying to see that 91% of the surveyed young people believe that social networks have a negative impact on their life and well-being. This assessment is not necessarily wrong, as there are many factors that can affect mental health, such as cyberbullying, FOMO (fear of missing out), and increased exposure to perfected depictions of other people's lives. It is good that young people are aware of the negative effect, but it is also important that they learn how to minimize the negative and maximize the positive impact.

QUESTION №3: Do you agree that the risks of social media are the following?

The answers given by the young people allows us to distribute the risks according to their popularity:

Risks in group 1: High popularity (between 70-80% of all the answers):

- Internet addiction;



- Bad role models and influencers;
- Fake news and disinformation;
- Cyberbullying;
- Negative impact on self-esteem and worth;
- Dangerous online challenges and trends.

Risks in group 2: Average popularity (between 50-60% of the answers):

- Theft of personal and financial data (phishing);
- Negative impact on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention;
- Distortion of the value system;
- Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content.

Risks in group 3: Under average popularity (40-50% of the answers):

- Social isolation;
- Interactions and encounters with strangers.

Considering the mentioned risks as known to the surveyed youth, it is found that they are aware of the most mainstream ones and do not think that some risks can harm them – like Interactions and encounters with strangers, isolation etc. If one looks at the risks mentioned, which are known to the young people surveyed, the most popular risks for those surveyed are coming across fake news (84.1%), or that too much internet consumption is addictive (84.1%)

QUESTION №4: If you wish, add risks that are not included among the listed...

Other risks mentioned were that the risk of extremism is increasing and the risk of fraud on the Internet is also increasing. One respondent indicated that many people waste a lot of time online as many people look at their smartphones at every opportunity and get lost on the web. One respondent indicated that encounters with strangers are not necessarily a reason for a risk rating. It is striking that the young people surveyed are not aware of risks other than those mentioned in the questionnaire. This suggests that their answers on the previous question are based mainly on bad experience - their own or of their friends and relatives. The lack of knowledge about risks suggests low awareness, which in turn means – higher risk for the young people in social networks.

QUESTION №5: Have you fallen victim to the listed risks?

Half of the respondents (50%) answer negatively to the question and denied exposure to risks on social networks. Unfortunately, around 50% of the surveyed



children and young people have answered positively that they have suffered from risks as users of social networks. The percentage of victims of the risks, associated to social networks is high enough to focus on the safety of young people on the Internet and attention to all the possible risks and harms. The presence of risky behavior around youth is a risk. To the additional question, related to friends, acquaintances or relatives already who have been victims of the risks mentioned around 60% mentioned that they have been witnesses and observers of such risk exposure.

QUESTION №6: Please indicate which of the risks you were a victim of and explain the negative impact on your well-being?

A relatively small number of answers were given for additional risks, related to social media. Some of them are too many hours on social media and anger problems. It is alarming to hear that the most cited risks among adolescents include fake news, impact on focus and attention, addiction and exposure to traumatic material.

QUESTION №7: Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?

Around 68% of the children and young people answered that they believe that they are familiar with the methods of protection against risks in social networks. Only around 32% have admitted that they are not aware about the methods for protection. If we make a comparison with the answers to question №4 where the respondents had to point out what the other risks in social networks and internet, we can conclude that there is a serious lack of knowledge and critical thinking among the surveyed. Main reason for that is lack of access to adequate information about how to protect themselves and which methods are working. According to the literature overview low awareness, low media literacy and not well-developed critical thinking among children and young people constitutes risky behavior. Safety of young people on the Internet is based mostly on recommendations and advice from friends, but not on professional intervention and training, which in this case is strongly recommended to prevent risky behavior.

QUESTION №8: Share the methods you are familiar with:

From the responses of the respondents, it can be deduced that they know some basic methods to avoid risks on the Internet. These include critically questioning



information, avoiding sharing personal information, using strong passwords, and blocking strangers. Awareness of privacy protection is also highlighted. Respondents emphasize that they pay attention to what they share, and which pages they visit. Some responses also indicate that they are open to help and advice when they are suspicious or unsure. The survey shows that many young people are aware of the risks on the Internet and already know some methods of protecting themselves. However, there are respondents who have little or no knowledge. There is obviously a lack of comprehensive teaching of media skills and a comprehensive range of training courses and training programs that prepare young people for using the Internet and help them to use it safely and responsibly.

QUESTION №9: Would you found a social media risk prevention methodology useful?

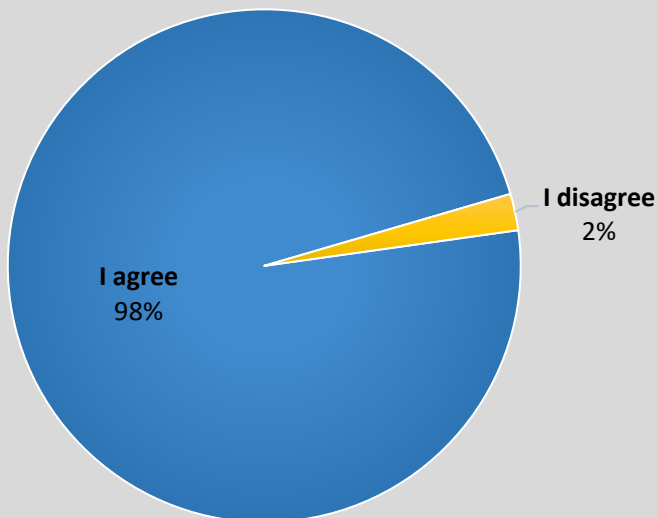
Around 73% of children and young people surveyed agree with the usefulness of the Methodology for risk prevention in social networks, which aims to teach young people how to protect themselves and how to help their peers. This is a very positive result and shows that most young people are open to risk prevention measures in social networks and recognize that they can benefit from such methods. A well thought out and implemented methodology, tailored to the needs and experiences of young people, can help raise their awareness of the risks and impacts of online behavior and give them the tools and skills to empower themselves and protect their fellow human beings. It is important that both parents and teachers are closely involved in the development and implementation of such methods to ensure holistic and effective support for young people.

Below are presented diagrams with visual representation of the data from the survey in Austria:

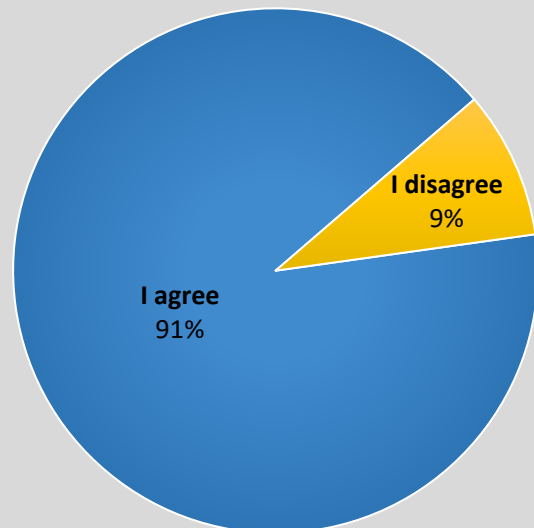


VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DATA FROM THE SURVEY IN AUSTRIA:

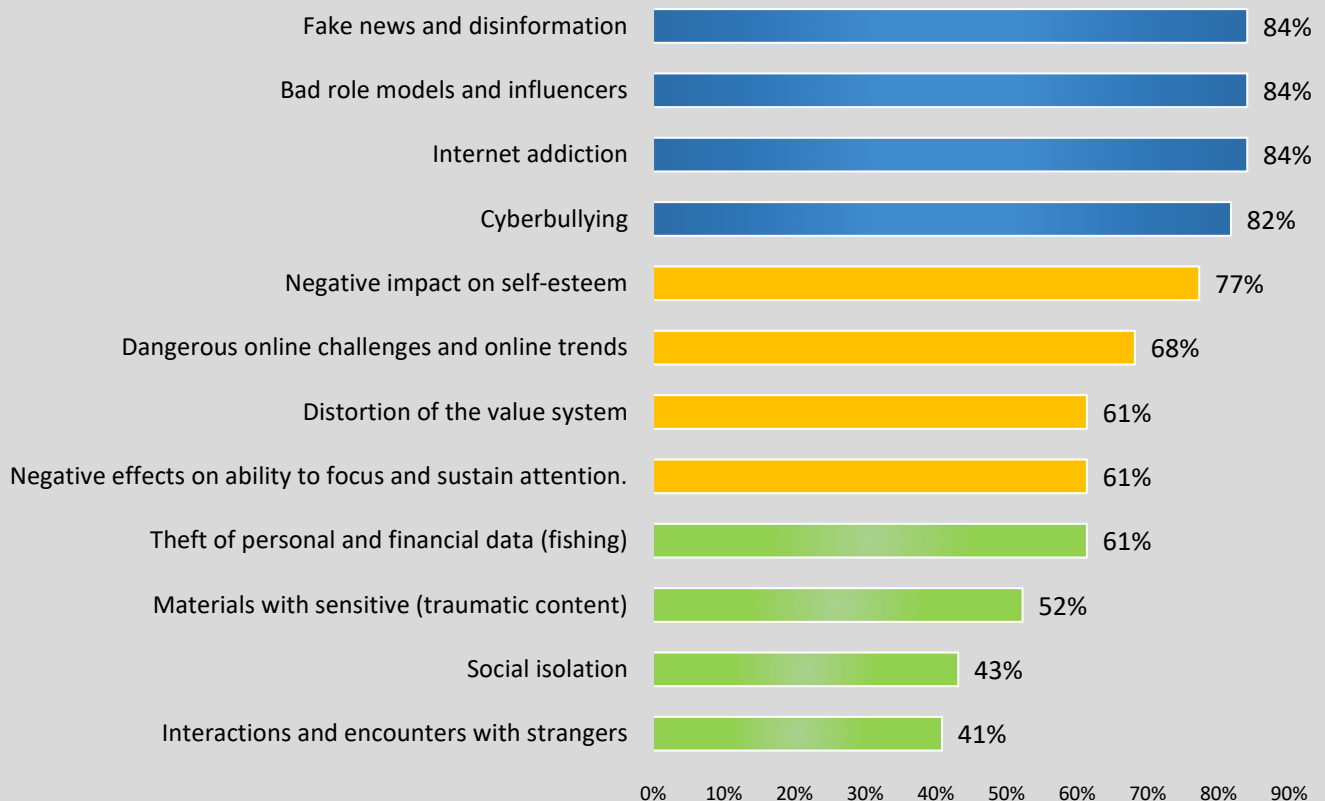
1. Do you agree that there are risky, fast-spreading virtual trends (risky viral trends)?



2. Do social networks have a negative impact on the lives and well-being of young people?

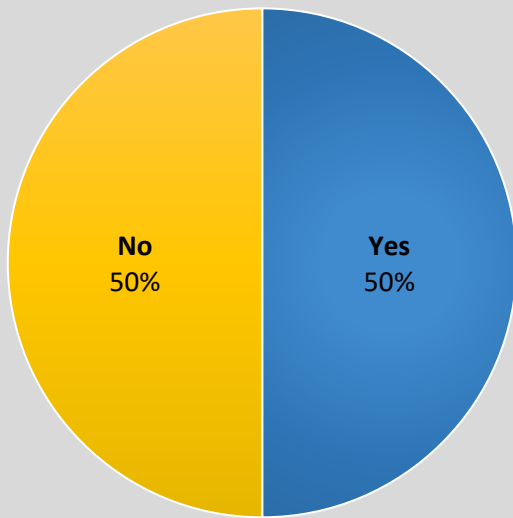


3. Do you agree that the risks in social networks are the following...?

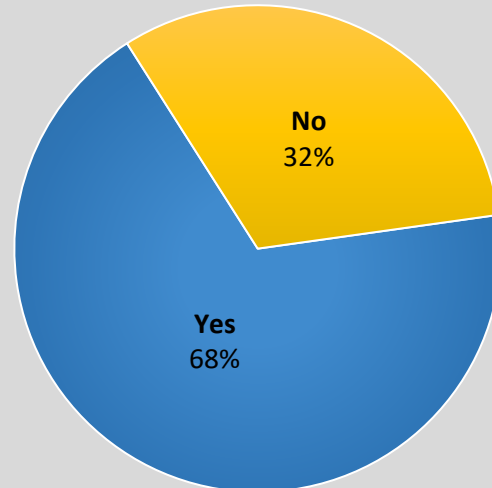




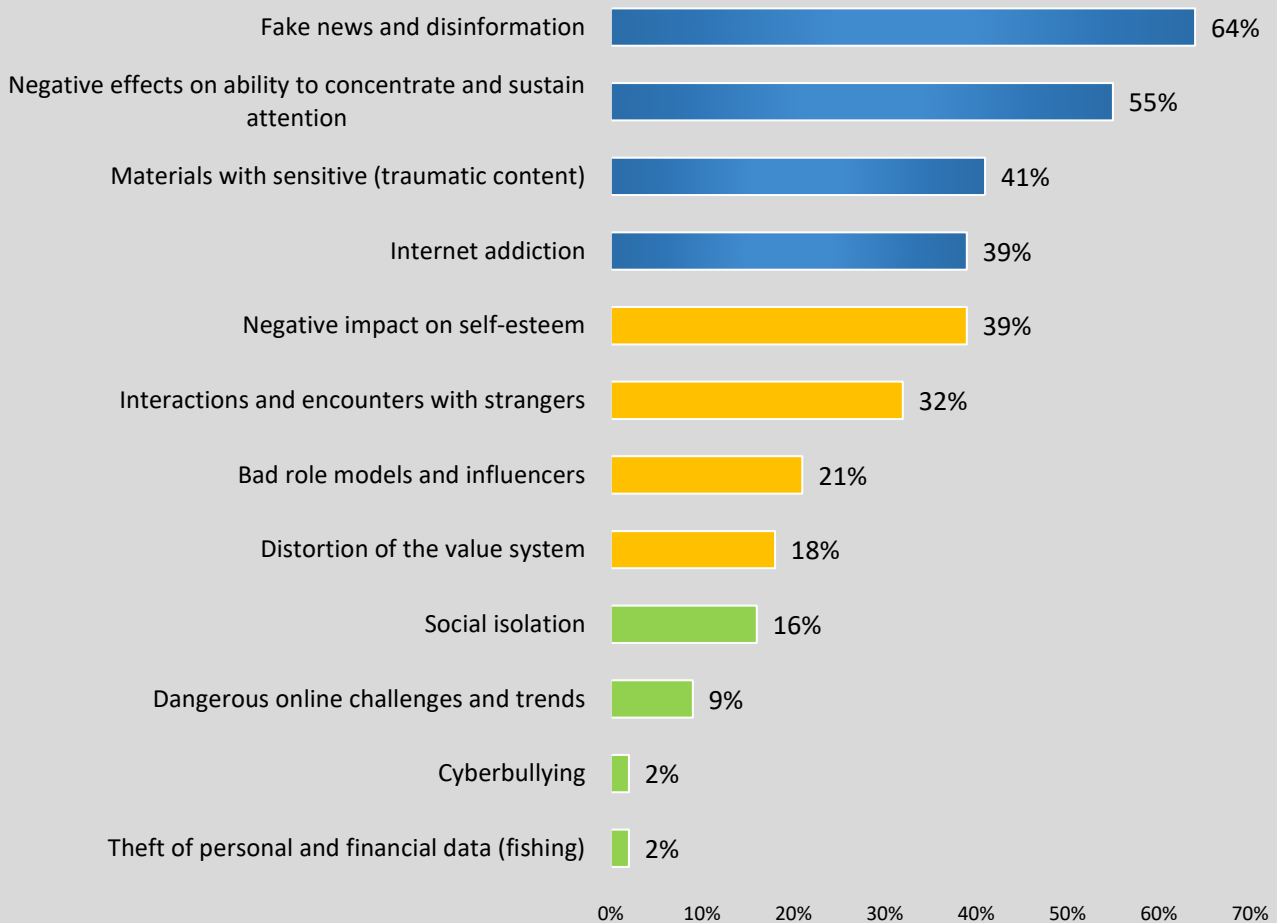
5. Have you fallen victim to any of the listed risks?



7. Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?



6. Please, indicate which of the risks you were a victim of...?





VI. CONCLUSION

To present a realistic picture of the distribution and significance of current risks, associated with the use of social networks among young people was created a comparison table, using three main perspectives:

1. Theoretical perspective - evidence in current sources around the world, related to the nature of social networks, their characteristics, influence over their users, positive and negative sides, risks, effects and consequences for children and young people.

2. Empirical perspective – statistical data from different studies, projects and surveys in partnering countries (Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Poland and Austria) in the period 2014 – 2024. Results from other recent surveys worldwide are added for broadening the perspective.

3. Survey perspective – a survey about the current risks, associated with social networks, conducted in the partnering countries – Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Poland and Austria in 2023. A specific questionnaire was prepared to ensure comparison of the results (see Appendix A). The sample of the survey included 392 children and young people between 14 and 29 years old who are internet and social networks users from all the partnering countries.

The classification of current risks, associated with social networks for children and young people used in the table below is according to the European classification of risks for children online²⁰⁹. The risks are distributed in five groups:

- **Contact related risks** when child experiences or is targeted by potentially harmful adult contact;
- **Conduct related risks** when child witnesses, participates in or is a victim of potentially harmful peer conduct;
- **Content related risks** when child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content;
- **Contract related risks** when child is party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract;
- **Cross-cutting related risks**, including privacy violations (interpersonal, institutional, commercial), physical and mental health risks (e.g., sedentary lifestyle, excessive screen use, isolation, anxiety) and inequalities and discrimination (in/exclusion, exploiting vulnerability, algorithmic bias/predictive analytics).



Table 9. Comparison of online risks for young people, associated with social media, identified in the current study

TYPES OF RISKS	THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE (assessment according to number of publications)	EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE (assessment according to number of publications)				SURVEY PERSPECTIVE (assessment according to number of answers)				Average sum
		Bulgaria	North Macedonia	Poland	Austria	Bulgaria	North Macedonia	Poland	Austria	
CONTACT RELATED RISKS when child experiences or is targeted by potentially harmful adult contact	3	2	3	3	4	1	0	0	0	2,67
CONDUCT RELATED RISKS when child witnesses, participates in or is a victim of potentially harmful peer conduct;	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	1	3	2,44
CONTENT RELATED RISKS when child engages with or is exposed to potentially harmful content	2	3	2	2	3	2	1	1	2	2
CONTRACT RELATED RISKS when child is party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	1,25
CROSS-CUTTING RISKS (privacy violations, physical & mental health risks, inequalities & discrimination)	4	1	2	3	3	3	1	2	4	2,56



DESCRIPTION OF THE TABLE CALCULATIONS:

- 1. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE** – publications, dedicated to online risks, related to social networks among young people were examined (published between 2022 and 2024 worldwide). After that an assessment was made according to number of publications. Bigger number of publications received bigger mark in the table as it represents a more popular issue. The numbers were as follows:
 - 19 publications, mentioning CONTRACT RELATED RISKS (mark 1);
 - 28 publications, mentioning CONTENT RELATED RISKS (mark 2);
 - 32 publications, mentioning CONTACT RELATED RISKS (mark 3);
 - 37 publications related to CONDUCT RELATED RISKS (mark 3)
 - 49 publications related to CROSS-CUTTING RISKS (mark 4);
- 2. EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE** – publications, dedicated to online risks, related to social networks among young people were examined (published between 2022 and 2024 in the partnering country). After that an assessment was made according to number of publications. Bigger number of publications received bigger mark in the table as it represents a more popular issue.
- 3. SURVEY PERSPECTIVE** - assessment here was made according to number of answers, given by the surveyed young people in each of the partnering countries. Eligible answers were considered only those, mentioned by 50% or more of the participants in the survey.

Bulgaria:

1. Cyberbullying (conduct risk)
2. Theft of personal and financial data (phishing) (contract risk)
3. Fake news and disinformation (content risk)
4. Internet addiction (cross-cutting risk)
5. Interactions and encounters with strangers (contact risk)
6. Materials with sensitive content (content risk)
7. Negative effect on concentration and attention (cross-cutting risk)
8. Dangerous online trends (conduct risk)
9. Negative impact of self-esteem (cross-cutting risk)



Macedonia:

1. Internet addiction (cross-cutting risk)
2. Bad role models and influencers (conduct risk)
3. Cyberbullying (conduct risk)
4. Fake news and disinformation (content risk)

Poland:

1. Interactions and encounters with strangers (contract risk)
2. Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content (content risk)
3. Bad role models and influencers (conduct risk)
4. Internet addiction (cross-cutting risk)
5. Isolation (cross-cutting risk)

Austria:

1. Fake news and disinformation (content risk)
2. Bad role models and influencers (conduct risk)
3. Internet addiction (cross-cutting risk)
4. Cyberbullying (conduct risk)
5. Negative impact of self-esteem (cross-cutting risk)
6. Dangerous online challenges and trends (conduct risk)
7. Distortion of value system (cross-cutting risk)
8. Negative effect on concentration and attention (cross-cutting risk)
9. Theft of personal and financial data (phishing) (contract risk)
10. Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content (content risk)

According to the results of the survey the most popular risks among young people in partnering countries include:

1st place: Internet addiction (cross-cutting risk) (mentioned in 4 countries)

2nd place: Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content (content risk), Fake news and disinformation (content risk), Cyberbullying (conduct risk), Bad role models and influencers (conduct risk) (mentioned in 3 countries)

3rd place: Theft of personal and financial data (phishing) (contract risk), Negative impact of self-esteem (cross-cutting risk), Negative effect on concentration and attention (cross-cutting risk), Interactions and encounters with strangers (contract risk) and Dangerous online challenges and trends (conduct risk) (mentioned in 2 countries)

4th place: Isolation (cross-cutting risk) and Distortion of value system (cross-cutting risk) (mentioned in 1 country only)



VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

After the final general assessment of the literature, results of studies and results from the survey in the partnering countries a ranking of risks groups has been determined that could be used in defining policy and measures for online safety:

1. CONTACT RELATED RISKS (mark 2,67)

- a. Harassment, stalking, hateful behaviour, unwanted or excessive surveillance;
- b. Online dating & extortion, sexual grooming, sexting, sexual harassment, sexual exploit, generation and sharing of child sexual abuse material;
- c. Ideological persuasion or manipulation, radicalization & extremist recruitment.

2. CROSS-CUTTING RISKS (mark 2,56)

- a. Privacy violations;
- b. Physical and mental health risks (incl. isolation, FOMO, negative effect on concentration and attention, self-esteem and worth, critical thinking, distortion of value system, addictions);
- c. Inequalities and discrimination.

3. CONDUCT RELATED RISKS (mark 2,44)

- a. Cyberbullying, cyberstalking, hateful or hostile communication or peer activity e.g. trolling, exclusion, shaming;
- b. Sexual harassment, non-consensual sexual messaging, adverse sexual pressures;
- c. Potentially harmful user communities e.g. self-harm, anti-vaccine, adverse peer pressures (incl. online challenges and trends, influencers and bad role models).

4. CONTENT RELATED RISKS (mark 2)

- a. Violent, gory, graphic, racist and other materials with sensitive content, hateful or extremist information and communication;
- b. Pornography (harmful or illegal), sexualization of culture, oppressive body image norms;
- c. Mis/disinformation, fake news, age-inappropriate marketing or user-generated content.

5. CONTRACT RELATED RISKS (mark 1,25)

- a. Identity theft, fraud, phishing, scams, hacking, doxing, blackmail, security risks;
- b. Trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, streaming (paid-for) child sexual abuse;
- c. Gambling, filter bubbles, micro-targeting, dark patterns shaping persuasion or purchase.

The ranking above would be a suitable base for defining best methods for prevention of social media risks in partnering countries, as well building a methodology for overcoming the problems, associated with social networks, educational materials for young workers and youth.



VIII. APENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

SURVEY FOR 14–29-YEAR-OLDS, INTERNET AND SOCIAL NETWORK USERS

Name: Age:

Please, mark the statement that is true for you by checking in the corresponding box:

- 1. Do you agree that there are risky, fast-spreading virtual trends (Risky Viral Trends)?**
 - I agree.
 - I disagree.

- 2. Do social networks have a negative impact on the lives and well-being of young people?**
 - They do.
 - They don't.
 - I have no observations.

- 3. Do you agree that the risks in social networks are the following (mark the statements with which you agree):**
 - Cyberbullying;
 - Internet addiction;
 - Theft of personal and financial data (Phishing);
 - Isolation;
 - Poor role models and influencers;
 - Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content;
 - Interactions and encounters with strangers;
 - Fake news and disinformation;
 - Negative impact on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention;
 - Dangerous online challenges and trends;
 - Negative impact on self-esteem and worth;
 - Distortion of the value system.



4. If you wish, add risks that are not included among the listed on the empty lines

5. Have you fallen victim to the listed risks?

- Yes.
- No.
- Not personally, but close friends and acquaintances have.

6. Please indicate which of the risks you were a victim of and explain the negative impact on your well-being?

- Cyberbullying:

- Internet addiction:

- Theft of personal and financial data (Phishing):

- Isolation:

- Poor role models and influencers:



- Materials with sensitive (traumatic) content:

- Interactions and encounters with strangers:

- Fake news and disinformation:

- Negative impact on the ability to concentrate and sustain attention:

- Dangerous online challenges and trends:

- Negative impact on self-esteem and worth:

- Distortion of the value system:

- Other:

7. Are you familiar with methods of protection against risks in social networks and the Internet?

- I am not.
- I am.



8. Please, share the methods you are familiar with:

9. Would you find a social media risk prevention methodology useful?

- Yes.
- No.



IX. REFERENCES

1. <https://www.netlaw.bg/bg/a/digitalna-zalgalka> Digital pacifier (How to overcome digital addiction?) Assoc. Dr. Daniela Ilieva, Executive Director of the Law and Internet Foundation
2. Cambridge dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>, 2024
3. <https://core-evidence.eu/posts/4-cs-of-online-risk>
4. Centre for Humane Technology, Ledger of Harms, <https://ledger.humanetech.com/>, June 2021
5. https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/social-media-is-toxic/43494utm_medium=advert&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=privacy&utm_content=ag-mxcl-exp-sp-en-id43494-v3&kwd=dangers%20of%20social%20media&campaignid=13441344132&adgroupid=122076748974&keyword=dangers%20of%20social%20media&device=c&gclid=Cj0KCQiAvqGcBhCJARIsAFQ5ke6VIHeHlBcEmkL7ZVmoOpmplGRm2BPnbu1B7F2TtCDuoG1Ts3Kk5dcaAq5zEALw_wcB, Why Is Social Media Toxic? How to Deal with It the Right Way?
6. Centre for Humane Technology, Ledger of Harms, <https://ledger.humanetech.com/>, June 2021
7. The Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre, <https://www.safenet.bg>
8. The Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre, <https://www.safenet.bg>
9. <https://clairemadden.com/product/p/hello-gen-z>
10. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437>
11. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021> The Common-Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021
12. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021> The Common-Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021
13. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021> The Common-Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021
14. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021> The Common-Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021
15. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021> The Common-Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021
16. <https://www.commonensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021> The Common-Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021
17. l1ght.com/Toxicity_during_coronavirus_Report-L1ght.pdf
18. https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/well-being/effect-of-social-media-on-teenagers/#block_6348d00258067-5 Effects of social media on Teenagers
19. https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/social-media-is-toxic/43494utm_medium=advert&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=privacy&utm_content=ag-mxcl-exp-sp-en-id43494-v3&kwd=dangers%20of%20social%20media&campaignid=13441344132&adgroupid=122076748974&keyword=dangers%20of%20social%20media&device=c&gclid=Cj0KCQiAvqGcBhCJARIsAFQ5ke6VIHeHlBcEmkL7ZVmoOpmplGRm2BPnbu1B7F2TtCDuoG1Ts3Kk5dcaAq5zEALw_wcB Why Is Social Media Toxic? How to Deal with It the Right Way?
20. Centre for Humane Technology, Ledger of Harms, <https://ledger.humanetech.com/>, June 2021
21. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>, Published by Ani Petrosyan, Jan 31, 2024
22. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/454772/number-social-media-user-worldwide-region/>, Published by Stacy Jo Dixon, Aug 31, 2023



23. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/260811/social-network-penetration-worldwide/#statisticContainer>, Published by Stacy Jo Dixon, Aug 29, 2023
24. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278341/number-of-social-network-users-in-selected-countries/>, Published by Stacy Jo Dixon, Dec 14, 2023
25. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>, Published Feb 2, 2024
26. Leading social media usage reasons worldwide 2022, published Aug 29, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/715449/social-media-usage-reasons-worldwide/>
27. [https://www.brightfuturesny.com/post/social-media-and-mental-health-statistics#:~:text=59%25%20of%20adults%20who%20use,\(fear%20of%20missing%20out\)](https://www.brightfuturesny.com/post/social-media-and-mental-health-statistics#:~:text=59%25%20of%20adults%20who%20use,(fear%20of%20missing%20out))
28. Source: Global Web Index via DataReportal, <https://www.statista.com/chart/18983/time-spent-on-social-media/>, 2021, accessed 2024
29. <https://www.statista.com/chart/18983/time-spent-on-social-media/>, Published 2021
30. <https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/it-or-not-social-medias-affecting-your-mental-health>
31. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>
32. Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 19-Sept. 5, 2023, "Americans' Social Media Use", PEW RESEARCH CENTER, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>, published 2024
33. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/social-medias-concerning-effect-on-teen-mental-health#:~:text=Numerous%20studies%20show%20that%20higher,poor%20body%20image%2C%20e ating%20disorder>
34. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437>
35. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1384158/us-teen-girls-social-media-addiction-by-frequency/>, Published by Stacy Jo Dixon, May 22, 2023
36. Feb 28, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1369020/us-adults-social-media-responsible-for-increase-in-teen-depression/>, accessed on Feb 12, 2024
37. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1426538/us-adults-harmful-social-media-usage-teens-kids/>, Published 2023
38. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1426559/us-adults-harmful-social-media-usage-teens-kids-age/>, Published 2023
39. <https://www.statista.com/chart/19262/impact-of-social-media-on-mental-health/>, Source: Royal Society for Public Health, Sep 6, 2019
40. <https://www.statista.com/chart/19262/impact-of-social-media-on-mental-health/>
41. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1440288/teens-uk-social-media-addiction-gender/>, Published by Stacy Jo Dixon, Jan 8, 2024
42. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/social-medias-concerning-effect-on-teen-mental-health#:~:text=Numerous%20studies%20show%20that%20higher,poor%20body%20image%2C%20e ating%20disorder>
43. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/tween-and-teen-health/in-depth/teens-and-social-media-use/art-20474437>
44. Enhancing online safety: Typology of Harms explained, <https://www.crispthinking.com/blog/online-harms-typology>, Last updated: Oct 04, 2023, accessed 18 February 2024
45. Cyber Harm: Concepts, Taxonomy and Measurement, Saïd Business School WP 2016-23, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2828646
46. Hillyard, P. and Tombs, S. (2007). "From crime to social harm." *Crime Law Social Change* 48: 9–25
47. DHS Office of Risk Management and Analysis (2011). *The Strategic National Risk Assessment in Support of PPD 8: A Comprehensive Risk-Based Approach toward a Secure and Resilient Nation*



48. Van Slyke SR, Van Slyke S, Benson ML. The Oxford Handbook of White-Collar Crime. Oxford University Press, 2016; Greenfield VA, Paoli L. A framework to assess the harms of crimes. Br J Criminol, 2013;53:864–885, 2024
49. National Institute of Standards Technology. Special Publication 800-30 Revision 1: Guide for Conducting Risk Assessments. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6028/NIST.SP.800-30r1> (13 July 2018, date last accessed), The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia. Privacy Amendment (Notification of Serious Data Breaches) Bill 2015. <https://www.ag.gov.au/Consultations/Pages/serious-data-breach-notification.aspx> (13 July 2018, date last accessed), Gizmodo. Last month's massive target hack was the heating guy's fault, 2014. <http://gizmodo.com/last-months-massive-target-hack-was-the-heating-guys-1516926877> (13 July 2018, date last accessed)
50. 4 Cs of online risk, <https://core-evidence.eu/posts/4-cs-of-online-risk>, [The 4Cs: Classifying online risk to children, CO:RE Short Report Series, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/71817/ssoar-2021-livingstone_et_al-The_4Cs_Classifying_Online_Risk.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y&Inkname=ssoar-2021-livingstone_et_al-The_4Cs_Classifying_Online_Risk.pdf
51. Livingstone, S., & Stoilova, M. (2021). The 4Cs: Classifying Online Risk to Children. (CO:RE Short Report Series on Key Topics). Hamburg: Leibniz-Institut für Medienforschung, Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI); CO:RE - Children Online: Research and Evidence. <https://doi.org/10.21241/ssoar.71817>, https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/71817/ssoar-2021-livingstone_et_al-The_4Cs_Classifying_Online_Risk.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y&Inkname=ssoar-2021-livingstone_et_al-The_4Cs_Classifying_Online_Risk.pdf
52. Toolkit for Digital Safety Design Interventions and Innovations: Typology of Online Harms, World Economic Forum, INSIGHT REPORT, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Typology_of_Online_Harms_2023.pdf, august 2023, accessed 10 February 2024
53. 4 Cs of online risk, <https://core-evidence.eu/posts/4-cs-of-online-risk>, accessed 20 february 2024
54. The CO:RE classification of online risk to children, Livingstone, S., & Stoilova, M. (2021). The 4Cs: Classifying Online Risk to Children. (CO:RE Short Report Series on Key Topics). Hamburg: Leibniz-Institut für Medienforschung, Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI); CO:RE - Children Online: Research and Evidence
55. <https://theconversation.com/stranger-danger-in-the-online-and-real-world-79517>
56. <https://www.lifefif.com/real-disadvantages-and-dangers-of-talking-to-strangers>
57. <https://theconversation.com/stranger-danger-in-the-online-and-real-world-79517>
58. COP Guidelines for Policymakers in Bulgarian.pdf Guidance for policymakers on protecting children online
59. <https://www.internetmatters.org/resources/teens-and-online-dating-advice-hub-for-parents/online-dating-the-risks-for-teens>
60. <https://www.regain.us/advice/love/8-reasons-caution-is-needed-to-chat-with-strangers-online>
61. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberbullying>
62. https://www.puresight.com/case_studies/the-dangers-of-cyberbullying
63. <https://socialmediavictims.org/cyberbullying/effects>
64. <https://socialmediavictims.org/cyberbullying/effects>
65. Barlett, Christopher P.; Simmers, Matthew M.; Roth, Brendan; Gentile, Douglas (July 4, 2021), "Comparing cyberbullying prevalence and process before and during the COVID-19 pandemic", The Journal of Social Psychology
66. Vaillancourt, Tracy; Brittain, Heather; Krygsman, Amanda; Farrell, Ann H.; Landon, Sally; Pepler, Debra (July 7, 2021), "School bullying before and during COVID-19: Results from a population-based randomized design", Aggressive Behaviour



67. Smith, Alison M. (September 5, 2008). Protection of Children Online: Federal and State Laws Addressing Cyberstalking, Cyberharassment, and Cyberbullying (Report).
68. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doxing>
69. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberstalking#:~:text=Cyberstalking%20is%20often%20accompanied%20by,person%20whom%20the%20target%20knows>
70. Diaz, Fernando L. (2016). "Trolling & the First Amendment: Protecting Internet Speech in the Era of Cyberbullies & Internet Defamation". University of Illinois Journal of Law, Technology & Policy
71. "Definition of TROLL". www.merriam-webster.com. Retrieved February 18, 2022
72. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/impact-social-media-influencers-teens-alexander-parry>
73. <https://www.cambermentalhealth.org/2022/07/06/social-media-sparks-dangerous-trend-of-mental-health-self-diagnosing>
74. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Dangerous-Internet-Challenges.aspx#:~:text=But%20other%20challenges%20that%20pop,the%20salt%20and%20ice%20c>hallenge
75. <https://www.familyminded.com/s/dangerous-social-media-challenges-31c1b2b2be14413b>
76. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Internet_challenges
77. <https://medium.com/@jennifergpp1994/the-impact-of-social-media-influencers-on-children-6b6bd4649311>
78. <https://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/blog/social-media-trend-body-image>
79. <https://thebirdfeed.org/20448/opinions/tiktoks-body-checks-are-the-latest-social-media-trend-to-promote-unhealthy-beauty-standards>
80. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Dangerous-Internet-Challenges.aspx#:~:text=But%20other%20challenges%20that%20pop,the%20salt%20and%20ice%20c>hallenge
81. <https://safespace.qa/en/topic/dealing-sensitive-media-when-online>
82. <https://www.internetmatters.org/issues/inappropriate-content/learn-about-it>
83. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/05/150506164240.htm>
84. <https://www.togetherai.com/blog/7-ways-adult-content-can-damage-a-child-mind>
85. <https://www.longdom.org/proceedings/vicarious-trauma-ptsd-and-social-media-does-watching-graphic-videos-cause-trauma-37421.html>
86. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/social-media-traumatizing_l_602d2c88c5b673b19b654d88
87. <https://safespace.qa/en/topic/dealing-sensitive-media-when-online>
88. <https://www.cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news/danger-social>, The Danger of Fake News in Inflaming or Suppressing Social Conflict
89. <https://www.peoplesbanknet.com/the-dangers-of-fake-news>
90. <https://www.peoplesbanknet.com/the-dangers-of-fake-news>
91. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/dealing-with-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news>
92. <https://www.mironline.ca/platforms-of-propaganda-how-social-media-sites-facilitate-and-spread-disinformation>
93. <https://www.internetmatters.org/issues/fake-news-and-misinformation-advice-hub/learn-about-fake-news-to-support-children>
94. Phishing, <https://www.techtarget.com/searchsecurity/definition/phishing>
95. <https://www.addictions.com/internet/dangerous-effects-internet-addiction>
96. <https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/social-media-addiction>
97. <https://www.addictions.com/internet/dangerous-effects-internet-addiction>
98. <https://nlptherapy.bg/пристрастяване-към-интернет.html>
99. <https://www.addictions.com/internet/dangerous-effects-internet-addiction>
100. <https://www.addictions.com/internet/dangerous-effects-internet-addiction>



101. <https://americansecuritytoday.com/the-dangers-of-internet-addiction-and-how-to-protect-yourself-from-them>
102. <https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/internet-addiction>
103. The 6 Most Common Types of Technology Addiction,
<https://www.familyaddictionspecialist.com/blog/the-6-most-common-types-of-technology-addiction>
104. <https://socialmediavictims.org/mental-health/loneliness>
105. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2017/03/06/social-media-and-social-isolation-go-hand-in-hand-but-which-comes-first/?sh=7c3849201785>
106. <https://www.techprevue.com/negative-social-media-adolescents>
107. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fear_of_missing_out#Symptoms
108. <https://www.brainpost.co/weekly-brainpost/2021/5/25/attention-in-the-age-of-social-media>
109. <https://countercurrents.org/2021/04/impact-of-social-media-on-our-attention-span-and-its-dramatic-aftermath>
110. <https://share.baptisthealth.com/social-media-and-attention-span>
111. <https://muckrack.com/blog/2020/07/14/how-declining-attention-spans-impact-your-social-media>
112. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.711416/full>
113. <https://studybreaks.com/tvfilm/social-media-ruining-attention-span>
114. <https://theconversation.com/how-social-media-can-crush-your-self-esteem-174009#:~:text=Research%20shows%20that%20the%20more,esteem%20and%20higher%20social%20anxiety>
115. <https://socialmediavictims.org/mental-health/self-esteem>
116. <https://www.acc.edu.au/blog/social-media-low-self-esteem>
117. <https://www.psychreg.org/negative-effect-social-media-self-esteem>
118. <https://childmind.org/article/social-media-and-self-doubt>
119. <https://gap.hks.harvard.edu/how-does-media-influence-social-norms-field-experiment-role-common-knowledge>
120. <https://pmpjournal.org/index.php/pmp/article/view/72/68>
121. <https://values.institute/how-does-the-media-affect-the-values-of-children-and-adults/#:~:text=Values%20and%20social%20media,-No%20exploration%20of&text=Many%20parents%20experience%20anxiety%20over,and%20values%20dominate%20social%20media>
122. <http://www.nycrimecommission.org/pdfs/social-media-impacts-behavior-norms.pdf>
123. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/social-media-death-critical-thinking-juan-viale-rigo-social-media-and-the-death-of-critical-thinking-juan-viale-rigo>
124. Problems of postmodernity, Volume VI, Issue 1, 2016, Teodora Hristova, The problem of values in internet social networks
125. What Are the Positives of Social Media for Teens?,
<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/empowering-teens/positives-of-social-media/>
126. What Are the Positives of Social Media for Teens?,
<https://www.newportacademy.com/resources/empowering-teens/positives-of-social-media/>
127. <https://www.safenet.bg/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/risks-and-harm.pdf>
128. <http://globalkidsonline.net/are-children-empowered-to-benefit-from-the-internet/>
129. Bulgaria among Countries with Europe's Largest Rate of Social Media Use by Youths on Non-School Days – Study, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news//50518-Bulgaria-among-Countries-with-Europe-s-Largest-Rate-of-Social-Media-Use-by-Youth>, SOFIA, 24.11.2020 12:34, BTA
130. <https://csd.bg/bg/blog/blogpost/2020/02/01/mladite-khoroa-i-krainoto-sdrzhanie-v-socialnitemrezhi-ima-i-drug-nachin/>



131. The Generation Z and their Social Media Usage: A Review and a Research Outline, Global Journal of Enterprise Information System June 2017
132. <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/8821/file/BGR-young-people-and-media-consumption-full-report.pdf.pdf>
133. Media consumption and "influencers" of children and young people in Bulgaria. Summary of results
134. <https://csd.bg/bg/blog/blogpost/2020/02/01/mladite-khoro-i-krainoto-sdrzhanie-v-socialnite-mrezhi-ima-i-drug-nachin/> Young people and extreme content on social networks: there is another way
135. DIGITAL 2023: BULGARIA, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-bulgaria>, 13 FEBRUARY 2023, SIMON KEMP
136. DIGITAL 2023: BULGARIA, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-bulgaria>, 13 FEBRUARY 2023, SIMON KEMP
137. Every Tenth Bulgarian has Never Accessed the Internet, December 8, 2023, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/222889/Every+Tenth+Bulgarian+has+Never+Accessed+the+Internet>, accessed February 24, 2024
138. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2808/households-internet-access-home>, accessed 2024
139. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2814/individuals-regularly-using-internet>
140. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2820/devices-used-individuals-access-internet>
141. <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2822/individuals-using-internet-purposes>, accessed 2024
142. New record: 100% increase in reports of online crimes against children processed by the National Center for Safer Internet, 23.01.2024, <https://www.safenet.bg/nov-rekord-100-rast-na-signalite-za-onlajn-prestapleniya-sresthu-decza-obraboteni-ot-naczionalniya-czentar-za-bezopasen-internet/>
143. My Right to an Opinion! Creating Content for Social Media, UNICEF Bulgaria and Bulgarian chapter of the Association of European Journalists, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/6551/file/BGR-my-right-to-an-opinion-brochure-eng.pdf>
144. <https://www.shepherdshillacademy.org/news/teens-and-social-media-understanding-the-issues/#:~:text=A%202018%20Pew%20Research%20Center,%2C%20Facebook%2C%20Instagram%20or%20Snapchat.&text=Not%20surprisingly%2C%20social%20media%20can,the%20mental%20health%20of%20teenagers>, 2018
145. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15266.pdf>, "Youth Study, North Macedonia, 2018/ 2019"
146. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15266.pdf>
147. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1238466/north-macedonia-daily-internet-users/>, 2019-2021
148. <https://internetfreedom.blog/2022/02/24/teens-social-media-and-online-privacy/>, published February 24, 2022
149. https://myla.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Privacy-and-protection-of-personal-data-of-young-people-in-a-digital-era.pdf#new_tab.
150. <https://azlp.mk/en/the-privacy-of-children-and-young-people-in-the-world-of-modern-technologies-internet-and-social-networks/>, published on 14 February 2022
151. The Agency for the Protection of Personal Data, with the support of the EU twinning project "Support in the implementation of the modernized legal framework for the protection of personal data" (more at <https://azlp.mk/eu-twinning>), prepared an informant on the topic "Privacy of children and young people in the world of modern technologies (Internet and social networks)". (More at: https://azlp.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/privatnosta_na_decata_i_mladite_vo_svetot_na_moderni_tehnologii.pdf)
152. <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/press-releases/unicef-more-efforts-needed-protect-children-online>, 06 February 2024



153. <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/cyberbullying-bye-bye#:~:text=According%20to%20State%20Statistics%20Office,and%20cyber%2Dbullying%20takes%20place,UNICEF,2023>
154. https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/republic-of-north-macedonia/68-media-literacy-and-safe-use-of-new-media#_ftn2, published 26 December 2023
155. <https://azlp.mk/одржани-часови-за-средношколци-на-тем/> published on 31 January 2024
156. Empowering Children Foundation, Children Count 2022 - Report on risks to children's safety and development in Poland, <https://shorturl.at/hsuUW>, 2024
157. Eurostat. (2020). Ageing Europe – statistics on population developments. Eurostat.
158. GUS. (2022). Raport zawierający wstępne wyniki Narodowego Spisu Powszechnego 2021. Główny Urząd Statystyczny.
159. Awareness of the risks associated with the use of the Internet among young people, www.uzaleznieniabehawioralne.pl
160. <https://scienceinpoland.pl/en/news/news%2C89532%2Cheadache-and-sleep-disorders-are-increasingly-frequent-symptoms-internet-overuse>
161. S. Wójcik, Children count 2022. Report on threats to the safety and development of children in Poland, Threats to children and youth related to the use of the Internet, Foundation "Dajemy dzieciom siłę".
162. J.Pyżalski, A.Zdrodowska, Ł.Tomczyk and K.Abramczuk, Faculty Of Educational Studies, Adam Mickiewicz, University, Report Polish EU Kids online.
163. S. Wójcik, Children count 2022. Report on threats to the safety and development of children in Poland, Threats to children and youth related to the use of the Internet, Foundation "Dajemy dzieciom siłę".
164. S. Wójcik, Children count 2022. Report on threats to the safety and development of children in Poland, Threats to children and youth related to the use of the Internet, Foundation "Dajemy dzieciom siłę".
165. A. Rywczyńska, Sz. Wójcik, Report on „Security child and young people online”, www.saferinternet.pl, Foundation „Dajemy dzieciom siłę”, Polskie Centrum Programu Safer Internet, Warszawa 2018
166. <https://www.eukidsonline.ch/files/Eu-kids-online-2020-international-report.pdf>
167. M. Bochenek, Z. Polak, K. Silicki, A.Wrońska, Guide for Parents „How to keep children safe on the Internet”, Research Institute Nask.
168. Pyzalski, J., Zdrodowska, A., Tomczyk, k. & Abramczuk K. (2019) Polskie badania EU Kids Online 2018. Najwazniejsze wyniki i wnioski. Poznan: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, [https://www.academia.edu/38511454/Pyżalski J. Zdrodowska A. Tomczyk Ł. Abramczuk K.2019 Polskie badanie EU Kids Online 2018. Najważniejsze wyniki i wnioski. Poznań Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM](https://www.academia.edu/38511454/Pyżalski_J._Zdrodowska_A._Tomczyk_Ł._Abramczuk_K.2019_Polskie_badanie_EU_Kids_Online_2018._Najważniejsze_wyniki_i_wnioski._Poznań_Wydawnictwo_Naukowe_UAM), accessed 2024
169. <https://scienceinpoland.pl/en/news/news%2C89532%2Cheadache-and-sleep-disorders-are-increasingly-frequent-symptoms-internet-overuse>
170. <https://base.core-evidence.eu/studies/63>
171. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9857052/>
172. Bullying in schools – when bullying stretches across cON/FFlating spaces (tandfonline.com), last access on 4.05.2023.
173. Tabea Bork-Hüffer, Belinder Mahlke, Katja Kaufmann: (Cyber)Bullying in schools – when bullying stretches across cON/FFlating spaces. In: children's geographies. 2021, VOL. 19, NO.2, page 241 – 253.
174. Bundesministerium Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz: Nutzung von Smartphones und soziale Medien durch österreichische SchülerInnen und Schüler. HBS-C-Fachsheet



- 03: Ergebnisse der HBSC Studie 2018. Available under: HBSC 2018 FS 03-Smartphone soziale Medien NEUpdf (2).pdf, last access on 13.05.2023.
175. <https://www.gabinetecomunicacionyeducacion.com/sites/default/files/field/investigacion-adjuntos/austriad.pdf>
176. www.saferinternetday.at
177. Tabea Bork-Hüffer, Belinder Mahlknecht, Katja Kaufmann: (Cyber)Bullying in schools – when bullying stretches across cON/FFlating spaces. In: children’s geographies. 2021, VOL. 19, NO.2, page 241 – 253.
178. Tabea Bork-Hüffer: cON/FFlating spaces: On the intersections and conflation of our ONLINE and OFFline worlds. Available under: [Blog] cON/FFlating spaces: on the intersections and conflation of our ONLINE and OFFline worlds - Transient Spaces and Societies (transient-spaces.org), last access on 4.05.2023
179. [Best practice heft 2020.pdf](http://www.bestpracticeheft2020.pdf) [mediamanual.at](http://www.mediamanual.at)
180. (Cyber)Bullying in schools – when bullying stretches across cON/FFlating spaces (tandfonline.com), last access on 4.05.2023
181. Zeliha Özlü-Erkilic, Oswald D. Kothgassner, Thomas Wenzel: Did the mental health and well-being of young people increase after the COVID-19 vaccination campaign period? A cross-sectional multicentre study in Austria and Turkey. Published on 21.02.2023. available under: Did the mental health and well-being of young people increase after the COVID-19 vaccination campaign period? A cross-sectional multicentre study in Austria and Turkey | SpringerLink, last access on 28.05.2023
182. (Cyber)Bullying in schools – when bullying stretches across cON/FFlating spaces (tandfonline.com), last access on 4.05.2023
183. Jugendliche auf social media – Trends, Risiken und Tipps für Eltern. Published on 11.04.2022. available under: Jugendliche auf social media – Trends, Risiken und Tipps für Eltern (onlinesicherheit.gv.at), last access on 29.05.2023
184. UNICEF. (2016). Perils and Possibilities: Growing Up Online. New York: United Nations Children’s Fund. https://www.unicef.org/endviolence/endviolenceonline/files/UNICEF_Growing-up-online.pdf
185. Byrne, J., Kardefelt-Winther, D., Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M. (2016). Global Kids Online research synthesis, 2015-2016. UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti and London School of Economics and Political Science. http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gko/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Synthesis-report_07-Nov-2016.pdf
186. UNICEF Report “The State of the World’s Children 2017: Children in a Digital World”, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/421/file/State%20of%20the%20world's%20children%20-%20children%20in%20a%20digital%20age.pdf>
187. UNICEF Report “The State of the World’s Children 2017: Children in a Digital World”, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/421/file/State%20of%20the%20world's%20children%20-%20children%20in%20a%20digital%20age.pdf>
188. International Telecommunication Union, ICT Facts and Figures 2017, ITU, Geneva, 2017
189. Eurostat, ITU and UNICEF, 2012–2016
190. International Telecommunication Union, Measuring the Information Society Report 2016, p. 135
191. UNICEF Report “The State of the World’s Children 2017: Children in a Digital World”, <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/421/file/State%20of%20the%20world's%20children%20-%20children%20in%20a%20digital%20age.pdf>
192. Zhou, Z. "Cyberbullying and its risk factors among Chinese high school students". School Psychology International
193. <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/practice/research/article?id=7104379>, 2023-06-30
194. <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/practice/research/article?id=6927069>, 2022-05-11
195. EU Commission, <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/practice/research/article?id=6927069>, 2022-05-11



196. Sourander, A.; Klomek, A.B.; Ikonen, M.; Lindroos, J.; Luntamo, T.; Koskeinen, M.; Helenius, H. (2010). "Psychosocial risk factors associated with cyberbullying among adolescents: A population-based study". Archives of General Psychiatry
197. www.eukidsonline.net
198. <https://inhope.org/EN>
199. Callaghan, Mary; Kelly, Colette; Molcho, Michal (February 2015). "Exploring traditional and cyberbullying among Irish adolescents". International Journal of Public Health
200. „Net Safe Project” http://www.canee.net/latvia/net_safe_project
201. <http://www.bezpecnyinternet.sk/>
202. <https://safe.si/english>
203. Slovenian Safer Internet Centre,
<https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/practice/research/article?id=6953979>, 2022-08-24
204. Little Kids & Media 2023, <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/resources/resource?id=130343>
205. Kids & Media 2023, <https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/resources/resource?id=130345>
206. Wetzel, C. Negative Effects of Social Media May Impact Adolescent Girls and Boys at Different Ages, Smithsonian Magazine, March 29, 2022, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/negative-effects-of-social-may-impact-girls-and-boys-at-different-ages-180979831/>
207. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, Teens and social media use: What's the impact?, <https://shorturl.at/clLO5>, 2024
208. Cross, D., Shaw, T., Hearn, L., Epstein, M., Monks, H., Lester, L., & Thomas, L. 2009. Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS). Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University
209. The CO:RE classification of online risk to children, Livingstone, S., & Stoilova, M. (2021). The 4Cs: Classifying Online Risk to Children. (CO:RE Short Report Series on Key Topics). Hamburg: Leibniz-Institut für Medienforschung, Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI); CO:RE - Children Online: Research and Evidence

Follow me Association, Bulgaria, 2024

ISBN 978-619-92834-0-0. (print edition) ISBN 978-619-92834-1-7 (e-book, PDF)

For more information about the project:

e-mail: follow.me.association@gmail.com

web: <https://followmebg.com>

Social media: <https://www.facebook.com/PreventionYouthRiskyViralTrends>