Fact or Fiction?

Critical thinking and digital resilience among young people, parents and teachers in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania

Center for Social
and Economic Research

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Executive summary

Digital platforms play a vital role in the daily life of young people, and it is essential to provide them with the skills necessary to better navigate the digital environment. **Critical thinking**, which refers to the ability to independently assess, verify and evaluate information, is key to managing the constant influx of content. In addition, **digital resilience** helps young people handle, learn from, and recover from online challenges, empowering them to remain strong and independent when facing difficulties in digital spaces.

This report discusses critical thinking and digital resilience skills among young people, summarising findings from consultations with **95 young people aged 12-19, 15 parents and 15 teachers from Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania**. Young people were consulted through child-centred workshops with creative activities to elicit their opinions. Adults were interviewed to provide additional perspectives on both family and school environments.

Young people use the Internet for **various activities**, such as entertainment, engaging with hobbies, managing relationships and education. They choose different platforms depending on their needs, customising their media use accordingly. Most claim that they do verify information through checking other sources, asking for help or assessing the quality of information. **Parents** consider the Internet an essential part of young people's identity, though they find it challenging to stay current with how quickly it evolves. They claim to predominantly rely on trust and open communication but remain largely reactive rather than preventative in their approach. **Educators** report that students find it harder to engage with traditional learning because of exposure to fast-paced online content. Attitudes toward using digital tools in education range from enthusiasm to reluctance.

Young people hold varied opinions on **online risks**, often considering many dangers less serious or unlikely to impact them. Young individuals primarily choose to disregard risky situations, regardless of their severity, or sometimes they engage with risky users. Young people are also reluctant to seek help and tend to handle dangerous situations independently. However, there are many positive signs of digital resilience. Many young individuals assess the accuracy of information and evaluate its credibility. Additionally, they utilise platform-specific technical features to mitigate potential risks. **Parents** express a wide range of concerns, including interactions with both peers and strangers, and across different applications, tools, and devices. Although they typically address crisis situations, their approach does not include proactive preventive measures. **Teachers** try to address group conflicts and observe how harmful online communities are to daily discussions. They collaborate with psychologists and social workers in hopes of providing stronger support.

Young participants' responses show that they are generally skilled in **detecting risk identifiers** and respond to false information in digital spaces. Most can spot both social and technical signs of questionable, false, or fabricated content. While their usual response to disinformation is to ignore it, some do take proactive steps. These strategies include correcting misinformation, raising awareness in their communities,

consulting trusted adults and peers, verifying information, and using platform features designed to assess credibility. Many **parents** rely on trust when expecting their children to make smart choices, often feeling ill-equipped to provide real support because they themselves struggle with online misinformation. Likewise, **teachers** frequently feel unable to teach digital literacy, as their attention is centred on main subjects, time is limited by packed schedules and exams, and they typically have minimal training in this area.

Young individuals recognise the impact on mental health as the most significant consequence of digital harm. They address it by relying on self-care and combating misinformation with peers. **Support needs** vary, as parents should set boundaries and provide guidance, teachers teach digital literacy, psychologists offer mental health help, peers provide emotional support, and platforms are expected to improve technical features and raise awareness. **Parents** lack the knowledge to support their children and receive very little support themselves. They would like to have more practical tools and collaborate with schools or other parents as allies. **Teachers** see structured programmes, dedicated subjects, and institutional support as solutions to limited time and skills for teaching critical thinking and digital resilience.

Intergenerational tensions are one of the key outcomes of our consultations with young people, parents, and teachers. There is a big mismatch in judgment – all groups have a lot of preconceptions about the others and tend to first place responsibility on others rather than take accountability. Limited dialogue and empathy resonate with limited support, as all parties prefer to deal with adversities independently despite desiring more collaboration. Despite common assumptions, young people can **demonstrate digital resilience and critical thinking skills**, even if they frequently feel their abilities aren't fully appreciated. Their ability to counter misinformation, use peer networks, and navigate platform features shows strong digital resilience. However, less avoidance and ignorance in risky situations, and better support-seeking could further improve outcomes.

Engaging young individuals in the decision-making process and considering their perspectives is essential for promoting critical thinking and enhancing digital resilience. Encouraging **youth** to take initiative, rather than remaining passive about potential risks, benefits not only themselves but also their broader community. **Families** can strengthen trust and communication to better support young people, especially during crises. **Educators** require systemic strategies and training to help students build critical thinking and digital skills at school. **Online platforms** should be responsible for designing features with children in mind. **Policymakers** can include youth in evidence-based decision-making and prioritise their digital rights over imposing restrictions. With greater efforts, but also greater support to all actors, bettering the Internet for young people and helping them in critical and safe navigation of online spaces should be a key priority for all.

1. Introduction

Now more than ever, people are exposed to an unprecedented flow of information from multiple online sources. Especially for the younger generations, technology and access to the Internet are a part of their everyday lives. Social media, streaming platforms, and algorithm-driven feeds have an influence on how young people perceive the world, influencing their beliefs, values, and decisions. While digital technologies offer vast opportunities for learning, creativity, and civic engagement, they also generate challenges such as misinformation, polarisation, and declining attention spans. **Developing critical thinking (CT) and digital resilience** has thus become essential for young people's intellectual and emotional well-being, as well as for their active and responsible participation in democratic societies.

CRITICAL THINKING refers to the ability to question, analyse, and evaluate information objectively and independently. It enables individuals to assess evidence, recognise bias, and make reasoned judgments rather than simply accepting information. In the digital age, CT extends beyond cognitive skills. Young people must not only identify false or manipulative content but also reflect on their own digital behaviour, their interactions with technology, and the broader impact of online communication. This ability to pause, question, and make conscious decisions is at the core of what can be defined as intelligent disobedience: doing what is right, even when pressured to conform, imitate, or remain passive.

DIGITAL RESILIENCE complements critical thinking by emphasising the capacity to adapt, recover, and learn from challenges in digital environments. It involves managing online risks, coping with misinformation, and maintaining psychological balance while engaging with technology. A digitally resilient young person can navigate online conflicts, verify information, and use digital tools creatively and responsibly. According to recent studies, however, many young people struggle with these competencies. Data from 2022 PISA study (2023) show that 23% of 15-year-olds in Latvia and Poland and 25% in Lithuania lack basic reading and comprehension skills, making them more vulnerable to misinformation. Furthermore, research from NASK (2023) reveals that over 40% of Polish young people find it difficult to distinguish fake from real information, while 70% believe that online safety is primarily someone else's responsibility. Despite its usefulness, most studies are not conducted with child-centred methodologies that allow young people to meaningfully express their views. While these findings highlight an urgent need for coordinated efforts to enhance critical thinking, media literacy, and responsible digital participation, we need to know more about young people's perspectives on what their desired Internet should look like.

THE FACT OR FICTION PROJECT was designed to address these needs. Its mission is to cultivate intelligent disobedience among young people aged 12–19, encouraging them to act ethically and independently in digital and social contexts. The project operates across Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, focusing on equipping

young people with the competencies necessary to function independently, considering the challenges of a rapidly changing (online) world. Project activities included **consultations** with youth, parents, and teachers; development of **critical thinking workshop scenarios** for educators; implementation of **critical thinking workshops** across three countries; and **dissemination activities** among teachers, youth and university students.

The present report summarises the main **findings from consultations** with 95 young people, 15 teachers, and 15 parents across Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The study employed a qualitative methodological approach tailored to each group: child-centred workshops were used with young participants, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers. The workshops provided a creative and engaging environment that encouraged adolescents to reflect on their digital habits, critical thinking strategies, and experiences of online risks, while interviews with adults offered complementary insights into family and school perspectives.

This report aims to guide **educators, policymakers, professionals, and researchers** in designing interventions that promote critical thinking, intelligent disobedience, and digital resilience among young people. The report presents results on young people's Internet use, perceived online risks, views on their critical thinking skills, proneness to disinformation, and potential areas for support. Based on the consultation's findings, actionable recommendations were developed for parents, teachers, platforms and policymakers, strengthening the digital capacities of both students and other adult actors.

The results of the consultation served as a basis for creating 20 workshop activities for young people, compiled in a critical thinking and digital resilience training guidebook for educators:
English version, available also in **Polish**, **Lithuanian** and **Latvian**.

2. Methodology

2.1. CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Consulting with young people on matters that concern them is one of the key ways to respect their agency. In **meaningful youth research**, young people's voices are treated as representing diverse perspectives – recognising their capacities to share their lived realities, experiences, and opinions. In this approach, researchers and practitioners challenge common stereotypes that portray young people as inexperienced or immature. Instead, it positions young people as knowledgeable contributors, fully capable of providing valuable insights into issues that affect their lives. It fosters an environment where their opinions are not only heard but actively inform decisions, policies, and programmes designed to support their wellbeing and development. Consulting with young people is fundamental in ensuring that research and policy are genuinely responsive to their needs. It also encourages a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants, reinforcing the belief that their voices matter and that they have the right to influence outcomes that impact their futures.

Research was conducted using a **child-centred methodology**, which aims to be comprehensive and tailored to young people's interests and capacities. Child-centred research includes creating conditions in which young people can share their perspectives in a safe environment, build mutual respect between researchers and participants, and engage in creative activities that are more fun than traditional research. Child-centred methods include activities adjusted to participants' ages, often using art-based methods, and fun group and individual exercises. This approach not only increases engagement but also elicits more genuine responses from participants. By recognising and valuing young people's unique viewpoints, the research ensures their voices are at the heart of the findings and recommendations.

This study was conducted in three countries: Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. 95 young people participated in 3-hour data-gathering workshops (32 in Poland, 18 in Lithuania, and 45 in Latvia). They were divided into three age groups: 12-14-, 15-17- and 18-19-year-olds. The workshops included creative individual and group activities, with age-appropriate worksheets, group brainstorming, reflexive discussions and presentations. Exercises asked about young people's digital preferences and habits, their experiences and perception of online risks, their critical thinking strategies, and support system availability and needs. The diverse range of activities was designed to ensure that participants from each age group could engage comfortably and express their views effectively.

To conduct locally sensitive international research, the project implemented a distributed data gathering methodology (Third et al., 2017, 2021; Third & Moody, 2021; Young and Resilient Research Centre, 2021). One data collection protocol was developed to be implemented across all participating countries. Local facilitators were trained to conduct data-gathering workshops, with translated workshop agendas and materials. Then, local facilitators translated data for thematic analysis, which was performed by the leading partner (CASE).

2.2. CONSULTATIONS WITH PARENTS AND TEACHERS

The study employed semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers to explore their perspectives on young people's critical thinking and Internet use. Interviews were conducted primarily online via Microsoft Teams, allowing flexibility and accessibility for participants across different regions. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across key topics while leaving space for participants to elaborate on their experiences and reflections in their own words. In total, 30 interviews were conducted — five parents and five teachers in each of the three participating countries.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016), which is particularly suitable for in-depth qualitative research with smaller, focused samples. The inclusion criteria specified that interviewees had to be either parents of children aged 12–19 or educators working with this age group. Within these groups, the research team sought diversity in geographic (urban and rural) and professional backgrounds, including teachers of different subjects, to ensure a range of perspectives. Notably, there was no requirement for participants to have prior experience or specific expertise in teaching or discussing critical thinking or Internet use—this allowed the study to capture everyday viewpoints and practices rather than only those of specialists or particularly engaged individuals.

To support systematic analysis, an interview grid was designed to guide data collection. The grid outlined the main topics of discussion, organised into five thematic areas, separately for parents and teachers (as presented in Boxes below). The grid served both as a framework for the interviews and as an analytical tool, helping to identify recurring ideas, differences between groups, and cross-country patterns in how adults understand and approach young people's online engagement.

PARENTS' INTERVIEW THEMATIC AREAS

I. Introduction

II. Children's online behavior and assessment of their critical thinking

III. Family discussions about the internet and safety strategies

IV. Parents' needs for support, education, and monitoring children's online activities

V. Recommendations and conclusions

TEACHERS' INTERVIEW THEMATIC AREAS

I. Introduction

II. Assessment of students' critical thinking

III. The internet and youth education

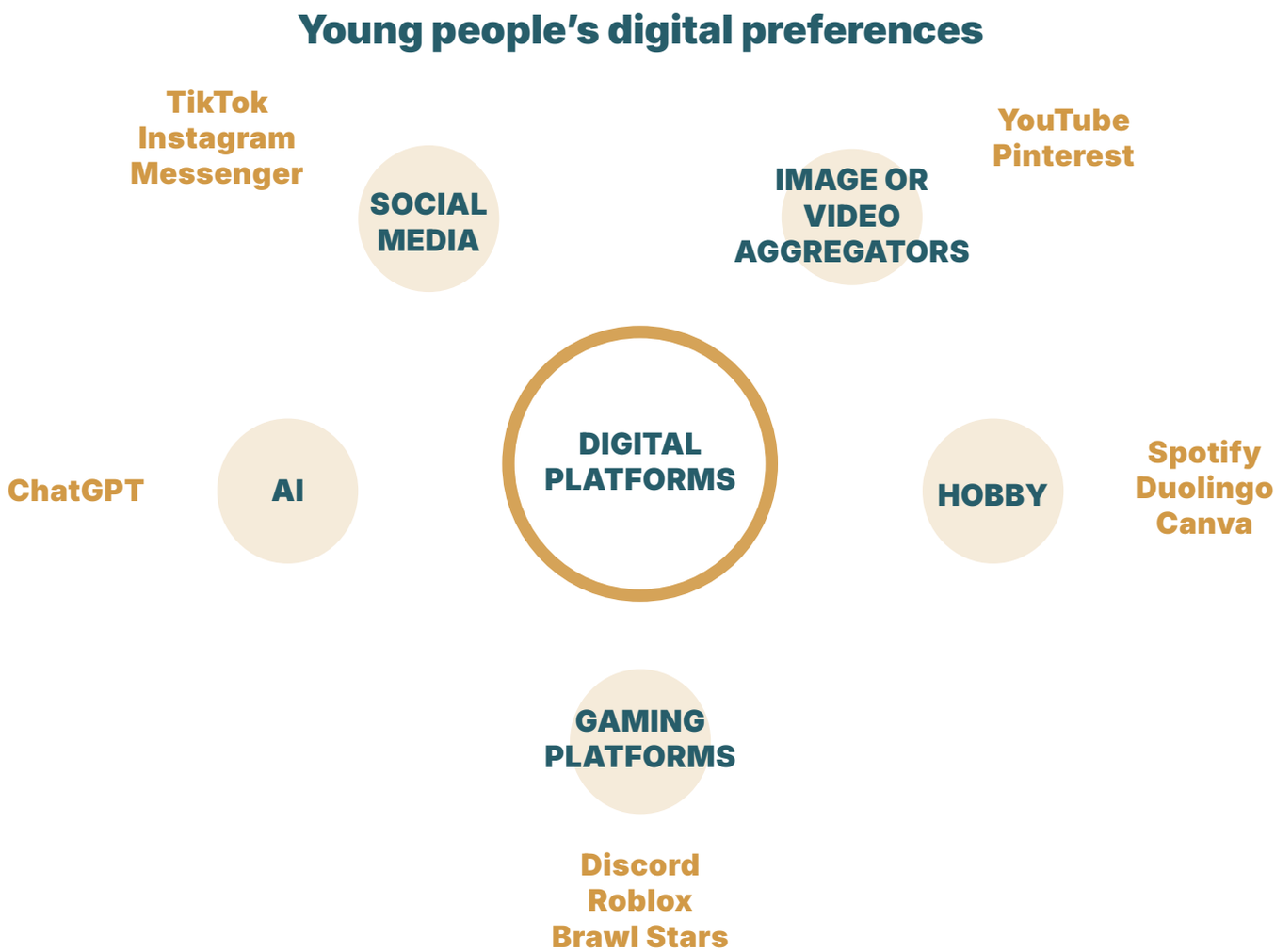
IV. Support for teachers

V. Recommendations and conclusions

3. Internet use

3.1. CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The initial workshop exercises asked young people about their **current Internet use**, including which platforms they access most frequently, the types of activities they engage in online, and their typical patterns of digital interaction. Facilitators encouraged participants to reflect not only on the websites and applications they use, but also on the purposes behind their online activity. This initial discussion provided valuable insights into the central role of the Internet in young people's daily lives and set the foundation for further exploration of their online behaviours and digital practices.



When asked about the **purpose of their Internet use**, young people listed various reasons behind their engagement with digital content. The most popular purpose of the Internet use was **entertainment**, where young people explained they use the Internet to watch funny videos or memes, listen to music or podcasts, or follow celebrities or commentaries. Another common purpose of Internet use is to engage with their **hobbies** by watching tutorials, finding inspiration, searching for creative content, or connecting with servers aligned with their interests. Many young people also emphasised the role of the Internet in developing and maintaining **relationships** by keeping in touch with their friends or family and socialising with other users. Less often, young people mentioned **education** as their purpose for using the Internet, but when they did, it was frequently used as a support for schoolwork or to learn new things, for example, languages. This extensive list of digital practices and preferences demonstrates that the Internet is a vital part of young people's lives, essential for shaping their identities, forming connections, and cultivating their interests.

What young people do on certain platforms?

YOUTUBE

"Compulsory school reading summaries"

"Tutorials"

TIKTOK

"Tutorials" "Tips"

"Music trends"

"Trivia"

PINTEREST

"Inspirations for drawing"

"New hairstyles"

INSTAGRAM

"Funny videos"

"Celebrities accounts"

"Friends accounts"

"Food recipes"

DISCORD

"Chat with my gaming friends"

Young people were also asked about their **verification of information** they find on the Internet. Most young people do verify information and have various strategies to check the accuracy or legitimacy of content they see online. Among those strategies, young people mentioned checking found information with **other sources** – both reliable sources and websites, but often also a simple Google search or ChatGPT query. They also tend to **ask others for support**, and among this trusted network, they mentioned adults, friends and experts. They also **check other users' input**, for example, comments under posts or content. These responses show that young people possess a range of content verification mechanisms that help them navigate online information with a critical eye.

How do you verify information you find online?

"Usually Google information after, just to make sure it's actually true."

Lithuanian group, aged 18-19

"Ask someone else if the information about certain thing is true."

Polish group, aged 15-17

"Check if the post has a community notes, if not, we search the internet."

Polish group, aged 15-17

Cross-cultural differences in information verification

Most young people in Poland and Lithuania claimed they verify information they find on the Internet, while in Latvia most said they don't.

When asked about their views on the **similarities and differences in Internet use** among peers, young people noted that they use similar platforms for similar purposes but observe differences in topics they are interested in, in the use of features, or in their personalised algorithms.

3.2. CONSULTATIONS WITH PARENTS

Parents describe the **Internet as a central and inseparable part of their children's everyday lives**, used for schoolwork, communication, entertainment, and self-expression. They observe how effortlessly young people move between platforms—scrolling through TikTok, chatting on Discord, streaming YouTube videos, or playing online games—while adults often struggle to understand or keep pace. This generational divide in digital competence leaves many parents feeling frustrated and uncertain about how to guide or monitor online activity. Attempts to set limits or restrictions are usually short-lived, as children quickly adapt or find ways to bypass them.

Most parents, therefore, **rely on trust and open conversation** rather than on technical controls to shape their children's online behaviour. While these discussions foster honesty and mutual understanding, they rarely **reduce the amount of time children spend online** or limit their exposure to problematic content. Gaming and social media are particularly dominant, sometimes raising concerns about dependency. At the same time, parents acknowledge that online spaces are not purely recreational—they also serve as informal learning environments where children access tutorials, develop creative skills, or explore topics of interest. This merging of leisure and learning makes it increasingly difficult to define what counts as "productive" or "wasteful" screen time, forcing families to navigate complex and shifting boundaries.

Parents about the Internet access:

"The Internet levels the access to what is good and what is bad – regardless of whether you live in a city or in the countryside."

Parent from Poland

Parents on their children's digital activities:

"What I notice most is that she uses the Internet when she needs to find something for school, but otherwise she does what she wants."

Parent from Latvia

Parents also recognise the **double-edged nature of online access**, noting that digital spaces expose children equally to knowledge and to harm. This awareness, however, does not always translate into effective preventive action. Many parents admit **they have a limited understanding** of how algorithms shape what their children see, believe, and value. Lacking both the technical knowledge and the tools to intervene, they tend to act only when problems become visible. Consequently, **parental mediation remains largely reactive rather than preventive**, reflecting a broader uncertainty about how to balance children's freedom and autonomy with their safety and digital well-being.

3.3. CONSULTATIONS WITH TEACHERS

Teachers across the three countries describe students' internet use as dominated by **short, fast-paced, and visually stimulating content**, with TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram serving as the primary platforms of engagement. The appeal of these spaces lies in their immediacy—videos are brief, entertaining, and easy to consume, which encourages quick information intake but discourages sustained focus. As a result, teachers increasingly observe that students struggle to maintain attention and to engage with longer or more complex texts.

Educators think that today's students are **digitally fluent but not digitally literate**. They navigate platforms with ease yet often lack the ability to evaluate credibility, distinguish fact from opinion, or critically reflect on the information they encounter. Some teachers try to counter this by assigning projects that require students to verify sources or reflect on content beyond social media, but such initiatives remain isolated and depend largely on individual effort rather than coordinated policy.

Teachers also express concern about the **limited involvement of parents in shaping children's online habits**. As families withdraw from monitoring, schools are increasingly expected to fill the gap, often without adequate time or resources. Educators describe the ongoing challenge of competing with the fast, captivating flow of digital entertainment, which offers instant gratification but rarely promotes reflection or effort.

Teachers on students' AI use:

"Language teachers, for example, complain that they seem to be reading the same works, the same sentences."

Teacher from Poland

The introduction of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT has further complicated this dynamic. While some teachers view AI as a valuable educational aid, others see it as contributing to a loss of originality and depth in students' work. While digital and AI tools can expand access to information, they may also replace independent thinking with convenience.

4. Online risks

4.1. CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The workshops next turned their focus to the critical subject of **online risks**. Workshop exercises encouraged participants to share their own experiences and perspectives on these risks, fostering an open dialogue about the challenges they face in the online world. Additionally, the workshops delved into the strategies and coping mechanisms that young people employ when confronted with such risks, examining risk awareness, resilience, and support networks.

Participants were engaged with a series of short, relatable narratives that illustrated nine distinct online risks. For each age group, the scenarios were tailored to suit the age and interests of the group, ensuring that the examples resonated with their everyday experiences. Young people were then invited to rate the severity of each situation on a scale from 1 to 5 and discuss how they would react if they were faced with such circumstances.

This interactive approach encouraged reflection and provided valuable insights into both their awareness of online threats and the practical strategies they employ to deal with them.

RISK	SCENARIO EXAMPLE (12-15 age group)
Child sexual abuse materials	Someone shows you a picture or a video of sexual content.
Cyberbullying	Someone writes you a hurtful message or a comment.
Fake news	You read news that is hard to tell if it's true or not.
Harmful content	You come across content you don't want to see.
Influencers	You listen to advice from an influencer.
Managing personal information	You post your photo and the name of your school on social media.
Online game addiction	You are struggling to control when you should stop playing games.
Online relationships	Someone you don't know writes you a direct message.
Scams and hacking	You are being tricked by someone to pay for something or click on an unknown link.

Table 1. List of online risks presented to youth during consultations.

Young people's **perception of risks** varies considerably. While one person can perceive one risk as very dangerous, another person may find it less disturbing. Generally, young people **rarely consider online risks** as extreme; none of the risks in any country were rated on average over 4 points on a 5-point scale. Additionally, certain risks frequently discussed in online safety contexts, such as cyberbullying, are regarded by young people as **less severe**. For instance, in Lithuania, young people rated the danger of cyberbullying at an average of 1.47 on a five-point scale. Similarly, things such as questionable advice from influencers or sharing personal information were **downplayed as barely dangerous**. This shows that young people feel less threatened by Internet risks than adults usually assume. In fact, many young people appear to take a more relaxed or even indifferent approach to potentially hazardous situations online, often choosing to ignore or downplay risks.

When young people were asked about **the actions** they would take in specific situations, their responses varied once more. However, some general patterns emerge across different risks that can shape how we rethink online safety education or support.

What would you do if...

• Someone writes you a mean message under your photo on social media.

"I ignore such comments; the situation will become more serious when more people start to publish offensive content about me."
Female participant, Poland, age group 18-19

• An unwanted picture or a video of sexual content pops up on the screen when you look at some website.

"For me, its easy to turn it off and not to watch something I don't like. So, I would just turn it off."
Male participant, Lithuania, age group 18-19

A key finding across all countries and age groups is that young people often **ignore risky situations or content** they encounter. This approach applies to both minor and severe risks threatening young people and society. For instance, more than 50% of participants in Latvia and over 60% in Lithuania would not respond at all to encountering child sexual abuse material, even though a reaction could potentially benefit not only themselves, but the whole society, for example, by reducing the distribution of such material. Many young people tend to ignore risky situations altogether or only respond when escalation makes action unavoidable. This passive attitude toward online risks can serve as a form of avoidance, which may lead to unintended negative outcomes for the individual or others in the future.

Another concerning issue is that young people often **interact with risky users** or content, even for the "right reasons". Young people say they would reply to harmful messages or comments, asking the sender to stop harassing them or to identify the person. Even when approached by strangers, some young people choose to reply rather than ignore or block the user. This poses a significant risk by exposing them to potential

What would you do if...

• Someone shows you a picture or a video of sexual content.

"I ask them not to show it to me/ and I leave. Then I most likely inform an adult."
Male participant, Poland, age group 12-14

• Someone writes you a message to sell you a ticket to your favourite artist's concert.

"I will tell them I don't listen to this musician, so I'm not interested."
Male participant, Latvia, age group 15-17

contact with the risky user, whether a stranger or a bullying peer, increasing the chances of further harm or manipulation in the conversation, which can lead to negative outcomes.

Young people also **rarely ask for help**, with less than 10% indicating they would turn to others when encountering most of the hypothetical risks listed in the study. Instead, they tend to handle dangerous situations independently, either by confronting them proactively or by avoiding them. The exception is online game addiction, where young people seek assistance when they feel out of control. This highlights the need to educate and remind youth about the importance of their support networks. Encouraging young people to regularly engage with trusted peers and adults can empower them to seek guidance and make safer choices online.

What would you do if...

• You are struggling to control when you should stop playing online games.

"Ask my boyfriend to distract me."
Male participant, Latvia, age group 15-17

"I try to play less, going out more, [have a] dopamine detox."
Male participant, Poland, age group 15-17

What would you do if...

• An influencer you like gives you advice on your diet.

"I verify whether such advice is really healthy, contact a nutritionist and verify the credibility."
Female participant, Poland, age group 15-17

• Someone you know shares news that is hard to tell if they are true or false.

"Try to fact-check/peer review attempt multiple way to discuss if it's true. The spread of misinformation is horrible."
Male participant, Latvia, age group 18-19

Among the positive sides, many young people **display critical thinking behaviours**, with mechanisms such as verification reported in situations such as encountering fake news and misinformation, harmful advice from influencers, dangerous online relationships, or being exposed to scams and hacking. Instead of accepting things at face value, many take the time to verify sources, question the credibility of information, and seek corroborating evidence before choosing how to respond. This indicates a positive trend: young people are actively constructing their own strategies to navigate online risks. These critical thinking capabilities should be strengthened with further encouragement and additional training and promoted across various types of risky situations.

Another positive aspect is an advanced ability to **navigate the technical features** of platforms to reduce risks. For instance, young people actively deploy features such as reporting inappropriate content, blocking problematic users, managing

What would you do if someone you don't know in real life writes you a private message that they want to get to know you.

"Evaluate the situation, block and proceed with caution."
Male participant, Latvia, age group 18-19

What would you do if you come across pictures or videos of sexual content.

"I would block the account, image. Exit the site or portal. Possibly report it."

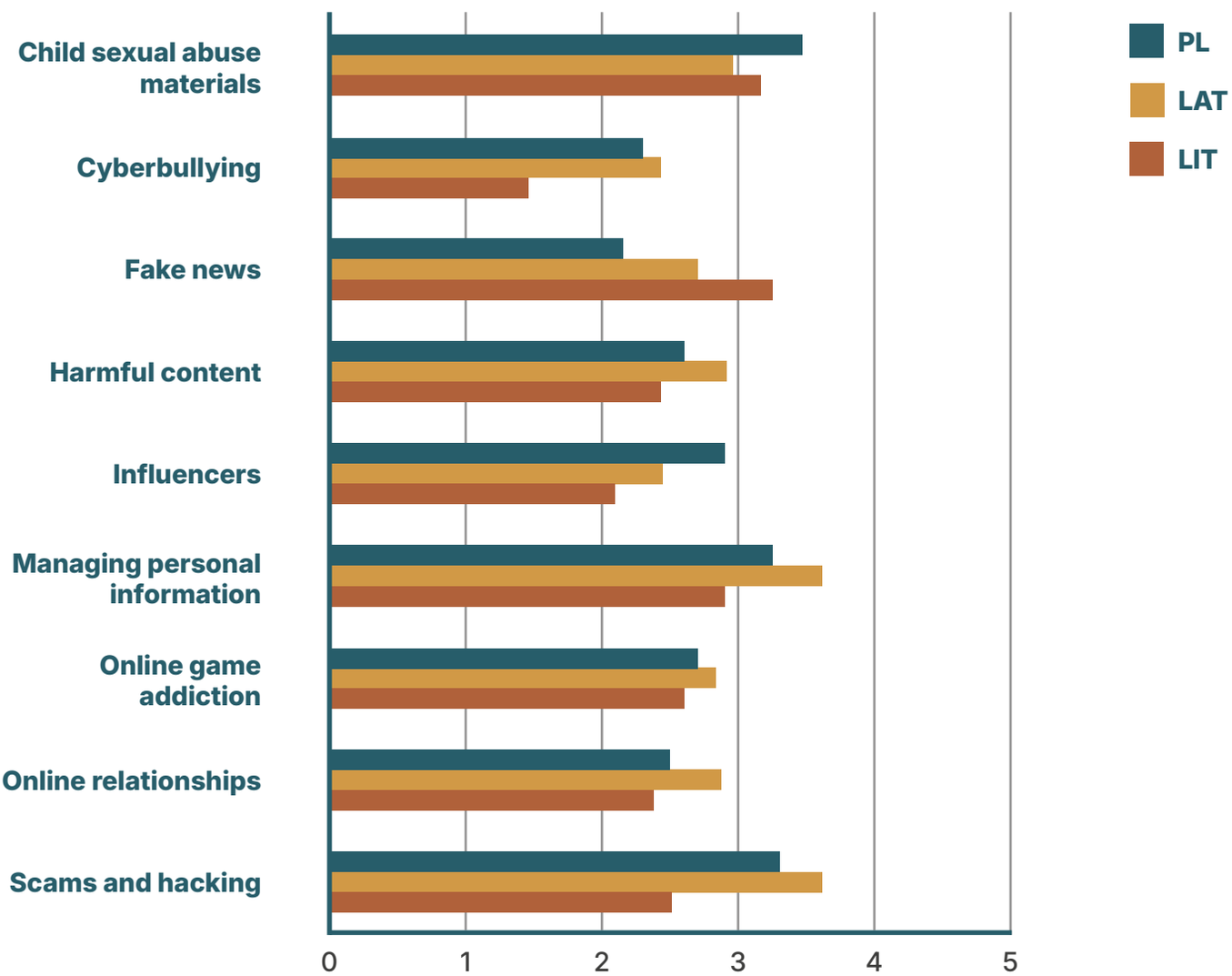
Female participant, Lithuania, age group 15-17

and customising their online feeds, and gaining an understanding of how algorithms shape what they see. These examples show that young people use deliberate strategies to handle dangerous situations, demonstrating a proactive approach to their online presence. These existing skills should be recognised, reinforced and acknowledged as significant successes in digital safety.

During the group discussion, young people explained **how they know how to act** in risky situations. They tend to **draw on previous experiences**, both their own and those of others, to learn from them and apply earlier strategies to new situations. They also **rely on intuition** to guide them in making choices and taking actions. Young people also share their doubts with **people they trust**, both adults and peers. However, peers were considered more trusted in comparison to parents or teachers.

Cross-cultural differences in risk perception

Risk perception varies among participants in different countries



4.2. CONSULTATIONS WITH PARENTS

Parents across the study described a broad spectrum of online threats that they perceive as both immediate and deeply personal. The most common concerns include **pornography, grooming, bullying among peers, cyberbullying, hate speech, and financial exploitation through online gaming**. These dangers appear in multiple, often overlapping forms, from strangers approaching children on social media to classmates harassing one another in group chats, blending social, psychological, and financial harm in ways that are difficult for adults to monitor or fully understand.

In many accounts, parents spoke about the way small online conflicts can quickly spiral into major emotional crises for children.

Parents on peer relationships online:

"There were situations like this: someone said something bad about someone else... someone recorded someone else in a stupid situation... someone posted something. [...] From our point of view, these are silly things—but for them, they are huge problems."

Parent from Poland

Parents on Internet control measures:

"There's some kind of challenge right now, that suddenly I have to do something special for her, I don't even know, supervise and inform her about what's on the internet, what's going on there and what's allowed and what's not."

Parent from Latvia

Parental responses to these dangers reveal a consistent mix of awareness, anxiety, and limited preparedness. While parents are vigilant about explicit threats such as sexual content or online aggression, they tend to overlook less visible but equally damaging risks, including ideological manipulation and exposure to toxic online communities. Most **families lack preventive strategies and instead react when problems become visible**—through spontaneous conversations, temporary restrictions on Internet use, or, in more serious cases, confiscating devices or disconnecting the Internet entirely. Many parents admit that they depend on schools, psychologists, or social workers to handle serious incidents, seeing them as better equipped to manage such crises. At home, discussions usually centre on the amount of time spent online rather than on the substance of digital interactions. Even when action is taken, parents concede that their measures are short-term and unsystematic, offering reassurance in the moment but rarely leading to lasting change.

4.3. CONSULTATIONS WITH TEACHERS

Teachers focus on online risks in terms of how they affect groups of students and the overall school climate rather than individual cases. They describe cyberbullying as a pervasive and evolving problem that often starts in private chats but quickly spills into the classroom, disrupting relationships, learning, and the sense of safety within the school.

Teachers on cyberbullying:

"We had peer violence and online hate — mocking, taking photos, making up things. Now, in the age of artificial intelligence, it takes five seconds to make something up."

Teacher from Poland

Educators note that many parents underestimate the seriousness of such incidents until they escalate, leaving schools to manage the fallout. Teachers describe spending increasing amounts of time mediating conflicts and coordinating with psychologists or social workers to repair relationships and restore order. They also point to **the normalisation of hostility in digital communication** — ridicule, exclusion, and verbal aggression have become part of everyday online exchanges, blurring the boundary between playful teasing and emotional harm.

Beyond direct acts of aggression, teachers warn about **the influence of toxic online communities**, from pro-anorexia groups to extremist networks, that offer adolescents a deceptive sense of belonging while reinforcing destructive attitudes and behaviours. Schools occasionally invite external experts, police officers, or NGOs to address these problems. Still, such efforts are reactive and short-lived, often prompted by crises rather than integrated into ongoing prevention work. Teachers consistently stress the need for systematic, long-term strategies for digital safety and emotional education that equip both educators and students to respond to a rapidly changing online environment.

5. Disinformation

5.1. CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Some of the workshop activities focused on assessing young people's **critical thinking skills** and their awareness of necessary actions and strategies to minimise the negative impact of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. These exercises were crucial to understanding how young people experience these phenomena and whether indeed they are as vulnerable or passive as general opinion suggests.

The older group (18-19) was asked about their **experiences with disinformation**, risk identifiers, and actions taken when encountering deepfakes, scam messages, fake news, fake accounts, online bots, AI-generated images, sponsored content, and clickbait articles. Most young people have experienced these risks at some point in their lives, but the frequency varies for every individual.

Young people are quite skilled in detecting **risk identifiers** in content. Their responses during workshop activities revealed that they could often recognise various signs of inconsistencies in imagery, suspicious language, or unusual sources. However, the degree of vigilance and the strategies applied can differ based on individual experience and prior exposure to digital risks.

RISK	RISK IDENTIFIERS	QUOTES
Clickbait article	Language, Abstract or exaggerated story, Suspicious website or account.	*"People's comments or by how abstract the title of the article sounds"* *"Flashy title, unbelievable information, encouraging you to engage, when in reality the matter is way smaller/the words are taken out of context."*
Fake account	Account "age", Quality of friends and followers.	*"No picture or stolen picture, no personal info, or little close friends, or some picture without name"* *"Very little followers, many followings, no profile picture or an AI-generated one, no meaningful constant posts"*
Fake news	Exaggeration, Unknown sources, Language.	*"The source is unknown/not verified, the images look edited, there are no other sources online talking about that information."* *"No source cited, inconsistency in the events described"*
Online bot	Language, Account details, Inconstancies.	*"If the information seems random, the profile picture and following, plus I don't know them"* *"Bots tend to post repetitive or generic messages"*

RISK	RISK IDENTIFIERS	QUOTES
AI-generated picture	Image inconsistencies, Technical features.	*"Most often the video is in poor quality or facial expressions are artificial"* *"Warnings or you can just tell by the uncanny movements and vibe"*
Sponsored content	Language, Disclaimers.	*"It's easy to spot. Almost every time, e.g., a celebrity or influencer expresses their opinion about products, it's sponsored content. It is more difficult to recognize sponsored content on other public figures"* *"It's written down the post and there are hashtags"*
Deepfake	Poor quality, Technical features, Plot.	*"There are often warnings underneath the video, but most of the time you can tell since its often celebrities in compromising situations that are unlikely to happen"* *"It's obvious, emotions not real, bad AI generated video"*
Scams	Language, Too-good-to-be-true offers, Account details.	*"Random senders, information not relevant to me, untrue pics or information, untrustworthy sources"* *"Red flags include bad grammar, too-good-to-be-true offers, pressure to act quickly, or links to suspicious sites"*

This extensive list demonstrates that young people are quite **skilled in assessing risks and identifying risk factors**. They are able to investigate and detect suspicious signs, both in terms of content, sources, and technical features. This existing knowledge should be supported and encouraged, along with early education for younger children. Continued development of these skills will help ensure that young people remain resilient and proactive in the face of evolving online threats.

When asked about actions they take when encountering these risky situations, young people again often **revert to ignorance** – just scrolling through and ignoring the content. Ignorance can be a sign of limited agency in young people,

Cross-cultural differences in disinformation risk exposure

Disinformation risk exposure and identifiers varied both by country and individually. Some locally-specific gaps were identified: Over half of young people from Poland and Latvia choose ignorance as their primary strategy. Youth from Lithuania often engage with technical features such as reporting and blocking unwanted or suspicious content. Youth in Latvia didn't cite identifiers for fake news and claimed they use 'intuition' or 'logic'.

characterised by distrust in the consequences of their actions and discouragement due to a lack of accountability. Ignorance can also reinforce the sense of helplessness and being alone in the face of adversities. Young people may also pretend that harm is not happening, or they may not be bothered by harmful content at first, only for its effect to be delayed.

On a positive note, young people sometimes employ **strategies to combat** disinformation. Among those strategies, young people list the correction of misinformation, prevention of spreading disinformation, awareness-raising among real-life and online friends, seeking help from trusted adults, verification of content with other sources, and using technical features such as blocking, reporting or deleting content. These techniques should be encouraged and supported, with recognition of the active engagement of young people in bettering cyberspace for themselves and others.

Facts and opinions

The younger groups (12-14, 15-17) were asked to assess several statements to distinguish a fact (something that can be either true or false) from an opinion (something that is subjective). Young people were generally able to make this distinction. However, some showed issues with statements that sound like facts but are opinions, with facts that require prior knowledge to evaluate their validity, or with situations where they are unsure if something is true or false. When asked about strategies for assessing information, they explain that they are guided by sentence structure, use their previous knowledge and experiences, ask questions, and rely on their intuition.

5.2. CONSULTATIONS WITH PARENTS

Parents commonly acknowledge that they are ill-equipped to help their children navigate disinformation, yet many continue to trust that young people will "**figure it out on their own**". This combination of confidence and uncertainty reflects a broader gap between awareness of the problem and the ability to address it effectively. Parents recognise that their children's main sources of information, especially TikTok, YouTube, and other social media platforms, blur the lines between entertainment, opinion, and fact. They admit that **even adults can fall prey to persuasive or emotionally charged content**.

Parents about trust:

"Maybe I live in some kind of bubble, or in the illusion that, well, I kind of trust my child [...]. Maybe I live in some kind of illusion that everything will be fine."

Parent from Latvia

Although adolescents occasionally check the accuracy of information in areas that personally interest them, such as gaming or technology, they rarely apply the same scrutiny to topics like politics or social issues. This **selective verification leaves them vulnerable to manipulation** in domains where emotional or ideological content dominates.

Many parents also reflect on the sheer scope of the online environment, acknowledging that their children are fully aware of its diversity but not always capable of judgment.

As one mother remarked, "Do they know what's on the internet? I think they know perfectly well that there's everything there—good and bad. Can they distinguish between what's good and what's bad? I don't know. But they know perfectly well that it's all there.". Their trust in their children's growing autonomy often substitutes for direct guidance, leaving the development of critical thinking about information sources largely to chance.

5.3. CONSULTATIONS WITH TEACHERS

Teachers emphasise that disinformation has become one of the most pressing and complex challenges in contemporary education, yet they feel **inadequately prepared** to address it. Many educators try to integrate discussions about media credibility and online manipulation into their lessons, but these efforts remain fragmented and dependent on individual initiative rather than forming part of a broader, coordinated school strategy. Teachers acknowledge that their capacity to teach critical media literacy is limited by structural constraints—**overloaded curricula, tight schedules, and pressure to prepare students for exams**—all of which leave little space for sustained analysis or reflection.

Despite these challenges, teachers express a strong sense of responsibility to help students develop critical awareness. They describe how young people rely heavily on short, emotionally charged content, often accepting it uncritically simply because it is engaging or widely shared. One educator explained that overcoming this passivity requires creativity and motivation.

Teachers on teaching in the digital age:

"You simply have to spark their interest and present it in such a way that they want to acquire this knowledge, but also that they actually use it in practice."

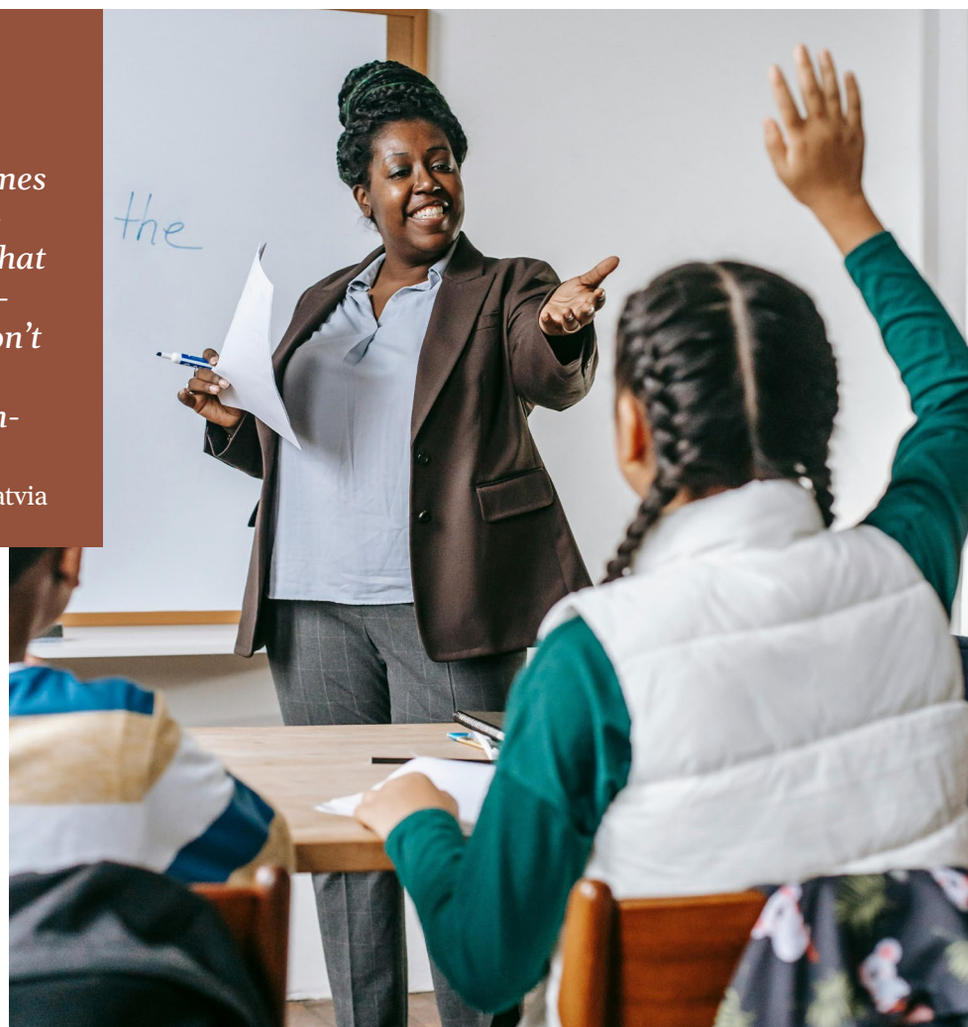
Teacher from Poland

At the same time, educators acknowledge **the lack of institutional support and systematic training** that would enable them to meet this goal. Many note that parents often assume schools will handle the issue, even though schools themselves struggle to keep pace with the constantly changing digital environment. As a result, teachers frequently find themselves caught between awareness and constraint: they understand the urgency of the problem but are forced to work within systems that offer few resources or methods to address it effectively.

Teachers on challenges in teaching critical thinking:

"Well, at this moment, what comes to mind is that perhaps the greatest achievement is to ensure that a certain amount of time is allocated to specific things. If we don't allocate time to specific things, then the result will be disappointing."

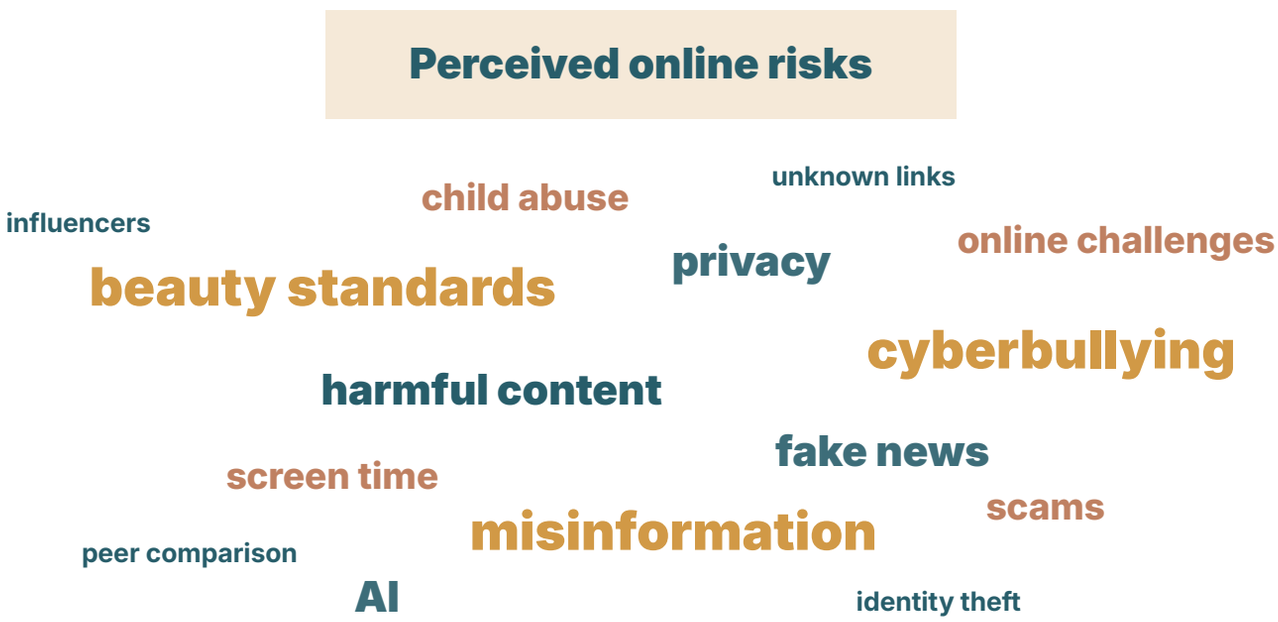
Teacher from Latvia



6. Support

6.1. CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Finally, young people were asked to share about their **perceived online threats**, listing the ones they consider the most pressing issues they face online. Young people also discussed **strategies** they employ when encountering these threats, and the types of **support** they believe are necessary to help them better address and manage dangerous situations online. Young people reflected on the kinds of care that could empower them to respond more effectively. These insights underscore the need for a collaborative approach, involving families, educators, and wider communities, to foster safer online environments and equip young people with the confidence and skills to face digital challenges.



Young people across all three countries highlighted similar **major issues** that affect their online experiences. Some of the frequently cited worries included cyberbullying, harmful content and fake news, which are often addressed in online safety education and media. However, many participants also voiced ongoing concerns about some of the rarely mentioned threats, such as unrealistic beauty standards promoted on social media, peer comparison, or the risk of identity theft, both of which can impact mental health and personal security.

When asked about the **effects** of these harmful dangers, young people most often referred to the **mental health strain** that online risks can put on them. Around 1/3rd of all effects mentioned by youth relate to impact on their mental health. The impact of the Internet on psychological well-being seems to be an ongoing concern, regardless of the risks. Other harmful effects that young people see in their lives are misinformation, stolen personal data, being exposed to unwanted content, physical health risks, peer intolerance, or worsened school performance, which have been listed in relation to various types of risks.

Similar to previous activities, the most common strategy when facing negative content or behaviours online is **ignorance**, which can result in a limited sense of agency and disregard for serious issues. In future online safety education, ignorance should be discouraged and could be replaced with teaching resilience strategies in the face of adversities. Among those, many young people already **report, block or delete** unwanted content, taking advantage of sophisticated tools and features of digital platforms available to them

for reacting to harm. Young people could benefit from further education about the available features and encouragement for using them for their own and society's benefit. Young individuals also participate in **self-care practices**, including engaging in hobbies, regulating screen time, and adjusting algorithms to prioritise specific content. They proactively manage their well-being and independently implement strategies to enhance online safety. Young people also say they **correct or verify misinformation**, and so actively contest fake news and prevent the spread of false narratives. They often have knowledge about trustworthy information sources and question suspicious online content.

In terms of the **networks of support** that young people have available to not face dangers alone, these vary for every individual. While they view close **trusted adults** like parents, teachers, or psychologists as important, they often feel these adults lack the knowledge and skills to provide effective help. Young people expect various forms of support from adults. **Parents** could help them set boundaries, such as screen time or parental locks, provide guidance based on their experience, and be present to take action in situations where young people become out of control. **Teachers** could be supportive by sharing their expert knowledge and continuously educating young people about risks and resilience. **Psychologists** can provide mental health support by offering space for discussing experiences and feelings with a professional. Another core source of support for young people are their **peers**, to whom young people claim they already reach for help in tough situations. Peers are expected to provide emotional support and reassurance, spread awareness about risks among each other, and engage in a dialogue for sharing opinions about certain situations. Peer support among young people is one of the core forms of taking action, yet it remains undervalued. Finally, young people also see the accountability of the **platforms** as very agentic entities that have responsibility for the safety of the Internet. Among these responsibilities, young people suggest developing technical features, monitoring content, and raising awareness about common risks among their users, for example, through educational campaigns. This activity also revealed that there are some young people who feel **alone**, feel like they have no one to turn to when facing online harm, or feel that there are no forms of help available. It is imperative for adults to be alert to the existence of such vulnerable individuals and what kind of assistance can be offered to them when their social support network is weak.

We asked young people about their ideas on how to act when encountering risks:

• How to fight peer comparison?

"Trying to skip and ignore the videos or posts about appearance, it's rating or classification. And when you do see one it is important to remember that we're all human. Some find something attractive and beautiful while you may not. It is needed to be open to different viewpoints and mindsets. At the same time, it's vital to not start asking yourself self-esteem-tearing questions about yourself. Social media should never make you feel this way. It is best to practice high self-esteem, boost it yourself with compliments, self-care and self-love."

Female participant, Lithuania, age group 15-17

• How to manage excessive time on social media?

"I put screentime on my phone, turn off unnecessary notifications, spend more time on other activities – friends, hobbies."

Female participant, Lithuania, age group 15-17

Cross-cultural differences about support for digital risks:

Lithuanian youth described mechanisms of self-care as a form of managing online safety. Participants mentioned they already employ some of these mechanisms in their daily lives.

Polish youth expressed the need to have several perspectives on one issue, to find reassurance, verification or additional confirmation about some issues. This can be provided either by peers or trusted adults.

Latvian youth consider platforms and peers as the most powerful source of support. They expect awareness raising and technical features from platforms to resolve their issues without interpersonal contact. Peers are mentioned as a source of support, through sharing similar concerns, experiences and opinions. The least trusted and agentic group are teachers.

6.2. CONSULTATIONS WITH PARENTS

Parents recognise that while they can offer moral guidance and emotional support, **they often lack the technical knowledge and educational strategies** required to help their children navigate the digital world effectively. Most rely on a combination of trust, flexible boundaries, and occasional restrictions, along with the belief that schools should take a leading role in online safety education. Many parents acknowledge that strict rules are difficult to sustain in practice. One mother admitted that she had tried setting clear time limits on screen use, but eventually gave up because it is hard to distinguish between the useful and wasteful usage of the Internet.

When asked what kind of support they need, parents consistently call for **practical, accessible, and non-technical solutions**. Many express interest in simple mobile applications that could serve as early warning systems, "digital lights" indicating when a child encounters inappropriate content. They also emphasise the importance of receiving concise and trustworthy information through official channels, such as school communication systems or municipal platforms, rather than through random online sources.

Parents on the school's role in children's development:

"In my opinion, school has less and less influence on children. Teachers are not authority figures. At home, school is not talked about at all—or school is treated as a place of oppression."

Parent from Poland

At home, parents rely on dialogue and trust as their main strategies, but they also recognise the role of schools and peer networks as essential allies in identifying and addressing problems. Many appreciate that schools sometimes collaborate with psychologists, police, or social workers in cases of cyberbullying or exposure to harmful content, acknowledging that these institutions are better equipped to intervene. However, some express disappointment at the weakening authority of schools in general.

Despite these challenges, parents value community connections and peer exchange. Many describe informal conversations with other parents as a vital form of support, helping them share strategies and feel less isolated in confronting online risks. Others advocate for face-to-face workshops and open discussions, particularly those that use powerful real-life examples to make online dangers more tangible for both adults and young people.

6.3. CONSULTATIONS WITH TEACHERS

Teachers across all three countries emphasise that they are insufficiently prepared and supported to address the digital challenges facing their students. While they are acutely aware of the seriousness of online risks and disinformation, most admit that their own competence in these areas is limited. Schools **rarely have structured programs or dedicated subjects** focused on digital literacy and critical thinking. Instead, such topics surface only sporadically, often as ad hoc reactions to crises, such as cases of cyberbullying or online manipulation, rather than being embedded within a systematic educational framework.

Teachers on school curriculum:

"I think they don't have time for that at all. The core curriculum is so extensive that they are really rushing, just like a hamster on a wheel, to get through it all."

Teacher from Poland

Many teachers describe feeling overburdened and undertrained, relying heavily on external specialists such as psychologists, police officers, or NGO representatives to manage incidents and provide workshops. While these partnerships are appreciated, they tend to be short-term and reactive, offering little continuity.

The structure of the school system itself is focused on exam preparation and overloaded with mandatory content which leaves **no space for sustained work on critical and digital competences**.

Teachers call for specialised training that would allow them to recognise and respond to digital risks without relying entirely on outside experts. They advocate for a cross-curricular approach, arguing that digital literacy and critical thinking should be integrated across subjects rather than confined to occasional campaigns. There is a lack of a coherent national strategy, noting that while local initiatives exist, they remain fragmented and inconsistent. Teachers stress that digital education must become a permanent and coordinated element of the curriculum, supported by professional development opportunities and stronger cooperation with parents.

Teachers on digital literacy:

"I think it is time to include media literacy as formal learning subject or to include it as an extra curriculum activity, to give more attention to it."

Teacher from Lithuania

Educators agree that fostering digital resilience and critical awareness among young people requires a sustained, system-wide commitment. Without structural reform and institutional support, schools are left to improvise, addressing complex online issues within systems that still prioritise content delivery over the cultivation of reflective, responsible digital citizens.

7. Inter-generational tensions

Consulting three distinct groups—young people, parents, and teachers—highlighted notable **inter-generational tensions** in their approaches to young people's digital activities. There is often limited mutual understanding among these groups, with each primarily focused on their own viewpoint, which contributes to a lack of empathy for the others. This disconnect can make it more difficult to develop mutual dialogue for supporting children's online safety, sensitive to all actors' needs and capacities.

One of the key tensions visible between youth and adults is the **mismatch in judgment** about young people's preferred digital practices. The same activities that young people find amusing, fun and entertaining, adults judge as trivial and time-wasting. Parents and teachers display a negative attitude toward the content that young people consume and create, considering it as stupid and "brain-rotting". The same goes for digital activities –while adults would prefer young people to use the Internet predominantly for education and self-development, young people like to use it for entertainment, building relationships and playing. Generational tension arises when adults view youth as immature and unable to make informed choices, which leads to disrespect for their preferences and increased misunderstanding between age groups.

Adults also **struggle to keep up** with children's digital competencies. Most young people have had lifelong access to the Internet, resulting in highly developed digital skills in both managing online risks and using technological features. At the same time, adults must continuously learn to adapt to digital innovation and stay informed about current developments in digital technology. Yet, despite these discrepancies, parents still want to control young people's digital activities and set rules for their digital participation. Their control mechanisms are superficial, though, and children are skilled at surpassing parental locks and finding ways around the set boundaries. Without a shared agenda or agreed-upon rules, adults and young people are often at odds—adults impose restrictions while young people find ways around them.

The **responsibility for fostering digital resilience** in children is frequently shifted between parents and schools, with neither party assuming full accountability. Parents see their role as responsible for boundaries – regulating screen time or deciding upon the accessed content. With limited preventative strategies, they also tend to push the responsibility for managing crises to professionals –including schoolteachers, counsellors and psychologists. While teachers do feel responsible for teaching children digital literacy and critical thinking, they feel ill-equipped, in terms of their own skills, time and resources. They feel like their assigned responsibility for managing peer relations and navigating crises is disproportionate, so they rely on external support from psychologists, police officers, or NGOs. This continual shifting of responsibility creates a fragmented support system, where no single group feels fully accountable or prepared to address children's digital challenges. As a result, young people are often left navigating online risks alone, without a coordinated, consistent safety net from the adults around them.

Educators acknowledge the **significant impact of digital technologies in education**. They observe that young people, now accustomed to quick content, may struggle with complex tasks and frequently depend on digital technology in learning. On the contrary, young people don't report on these issues, as they see increasing benefits from accessible knowledge and the use of technology to support learning processes. Teachers say they struggle with sparking young people's interest and find it hard to engage them, as they themselves lack the capacity to teach digital literacy and critical thinking. Due to limited understanding and certain biases, some educators perceive digital technologies as threats to traditional educational practices and therefore resist their implementation in classrooms or for student use at home. This perspective can foster inter-generational tensions regarding technology in education, further widening the divide among various groups.

Another paradox is visible in adults' approach to either enacting **total control over young people's digital activities**, or – on the other hand – placing full trust in them to **deal with dangers independently**, without adults' involvement. Neither one of those scenarios seems helpful to children. They either feel too restricted and unjustly misjudged as incapable of making informed decisions or feel left alone to face challenges without support. Striking a balance between guidance and autonomy is essential, as young people benefit most from collaborative support that recognises their evolving digital competencies. When adults engage in meaningful dialogue and provide informed mentorship, children are more likely to develop resilience and confidence in navigating the digital world.

Children and young people **feel unsupported by adults**, seeing them as unable to help or trust them. This sense of isolation can stem from various experiences, such as adults dismissing their concerns, having low digital literacy or authority, or failing to provide meaningful guidance. When young people perceive that adults do not understand their challenges or are unwilling to offer genuine support, it can erode trust and make them reluctant to seek help in the future. Instead, young people place more trust in peers and platforms. Peers are seen as the best source for nonjudgmental emotional support and diverse viewpoints. Platforms are considered as the most powerful actors, with means to manage online content and algorithms, and financial and organisational capacities to systematically address online dangers for youth. This lack of adult engagement further widens the generational gap, reinforcing young people's reliance on their own networks and digital environments for support.

All these inter-generational tensions contribute to unequal power dynamics, positioning of young people as subordinate and incapable, and limiting their agency and self-value. The **digital divide between young people and adults** – including parents, teachers, and professionals –weakens support ties and hinders willingness to act together for individual and systemic change through mutual dialogue and active listening. As self-reliance and peer trust grow, reluctance or inability to seek adult support can become a major issue, especially during crises. A more preventative, collaborative, and equitable approach to enhancing young people's digital safety and critical thinking will strengthen overall digital resilience.

8. Young people's capacities

This study placed a strong emphasis on child rights and actively sought out young people's perspectives to gain insight into their digital experiences and critical thinking abilities. Ninety-five young people aged 12-19 from both urban and rural regions of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia contributed their views on digital safety and online critical thinking. Contrary to widespread beliefs that young people are vulnerable online, the research reveals that **participants capably navigate digital risks**, manage their content responsibly, and use the Internet for a variety of constructive purposes. When faced with challenges, they demonstrate independence in problem-solving and are willing to seek support when necessary. Although negative experiences do occur, the findings highlight robust digital resilience among youth—one that challenges common assumptions and could be further strengthened through targeted initiatives.

Young people make conscious choices as they navigate online environments. They use advanced digital skills to customise and enhance their experiences. The Internet serves multiple functions, helping people explore their identities, form relationships, and meet various needs. Young people's critical thinking and digital skills are evident in both active content creation and passive reception, as well as in encounters with disinformation. Despite this, young people often feel undervalued for their digital expertise. They express frustration with being positioned as at-risk and susceptible to harm, while believing that adults are less literate in the online realm. Research with parents and teachers confirms these views –young people are seen as requiring strict monitoring and control by them. At the same time, adults themselves lack the necessary skills to support their children in building digital resilience.

Many young people who participated in the study employ advanced techniques and utilise a range of sophisticated **platform features** to manage harmful content, disinformation, and online risks. When confronted with potentially risky situations, they frequently turn to technical tools such as blocking, deleting, and reporting problematic content on digital platforms. Furthermore, they view digital platforms as key stakeholders with a vital responsibility for their safety, advocating for stricter content controls, greater algorithmic transparency, and enhanced technical features to provide timely support when required. Their proactive approach demonstrates both competence and a clear expectation that technology providers must play an active role in ensuring safer online environments for youth.

While many of the findings in this study are promising, there are areas for improvement. Unfortunately, many young people consciously decide to **ignore online risks**. This ambivalence is visible across all risks –even some serious ones, including cyberbullying, addiction or pornography. They often express that they are not bothered by them and evaluate many of them as only of low to medium impact. Young individuals frequently encounter harmful content or behaviours, and a prevailing approach to managing such exposures is to ignore them. Young people may not see the direct, immediate dangers of online risks, but the adverse effects can be delayed and affect not only themselves but the whole community. This highlights the need for ongoing education and dialogue to help young people better recognise potential risks and how to be active in addressing them.

Another notable challenge highlighted by young people is the relative **weakness of their support networks**. Many strategies employed by children are independent, and they do not seek help from others. To some, this leads to feelings of loneliness and the belief that harm is inevitable. As previously discussed, some young people perceive that adults are ill-equipped to provide meaningful assistance, citing lower digital literacy and a lack of understanding of youth-specific issues. This does not necessarily mean support is entirely unavailable; rather, young people are often dissatisfied with the support options presented to them. For some, however, support is genuinely lacking, particularly when they cannot rely on immediate family members. These individuals must receive additional attention from schools and other professionals, ensuring that a trusted adult is always available to them to assist in times of crisis.

This self-reliance also highlights the **importance of peer networks**, which are the preferred group for support chosen by young people. Nurturing peer support mechanisms can be one of the priorities for equipping young people with the capacity to both offer and receive help within their own circles. Nevertheless, adults should not recede into the background; instead, they must actively work to improve their digital literacy and engagement, positioning themselves as more effective allies to young people navigating the digital landscape.

9. Moving forward: recommendations and future plans

Our international consultations with young people, parents, and teachers highlight the need for seeking diverse views on digital safety and critical thinking. All stakeholders –including young people, parents, teachers, platforms, professionals, and policymakers –share a common goal: **safer, more critical digital experiences for young people**. Having digital skills and effective online risk management is crucial for young people, whether they exercise them independently or with support. Collaborative efforts to discuss, evaluate, and promote responsible online behaviour are an important step toward bridging the intergenerational divide and strengthening digital resilience.

It is essential to actively **seek out and listen to young people's perspectives** to gain a richer understanding of their online realities and critical thinking skills. This engagement should not be limited to academic research. Still, it must also extend to genuine, ongoing dialogue within families, collaborative efforts to co-create school curricula, and the formulation of evidence-based policies. By inviting young people to contribute their insights and experiences, families and educational institutions can foster a culture of mutual respect and understanding. Involving young people in shaping educational content ensures that learning is relevant, empowering, and reflective of the challenges and opportunities they encounter online. Moreover, incorporating young people's voices into policymaking processes leads to more effective and responsive strategies that address their real needs, rather than relying on assumptions or outdated perceptions. Establishing structures for regular consultation with young people—whether through research participation, school forums, youth advisory panels, or digital feedback mechanisms—can enable adults to better support young people in developing digital resilience and responsible online behaviours. Such collaborative approaches not only enhance young people's sense of agency and value but also strengthen protective networks, encourage active citizenship, and lay a foundation for safer, more inclusive digital environments for all.

EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE to take ownership of their digital experiences and recognise the significance of proactively addressing online risks is vital for the development of robust critical thinking skills. Promoting a culture in which young people are encouraged to respond to online harm—not only for their own protection, but also in support of their peers and the wider community—should be an integral part of both online safety education and family practices. The emphasis on taking action rather than ignoring risks applies whether the harm directly affects the individual or exists in damaging content accessible to others across the Internet. Ultimately, building a supportive atmosphere in which active intervention and collaboration are valued can help to create safer and more inclusive online spaces for everyone.

PARENTS also remain an essential target for change in how we think about young people's online safety and critical thinking skills. Findings from the research with parents emphasise the need to build **family relationships based on trust and dialogue** for mutual support and to establish agreed-upon boundaries. Family discussions frequently focus on screen time regulations, content limitations, and parental controls. Topics such as the emotional and relational components of online risks could be addressed more frequently in these conversations. A more proactive approach to online safety is needed, as parents tend to react primarily in the face of immediate danger or a full-blown crisis. Parents also need to constantly educate themselves, through dialogue with children and their own information-seeking, to provide meaningful support to young people. Increased understanding of online risks and awareness of personal limitations may encourage young people to seek support from their families, who are often perceived as less proficient in online environments. Parents also need to take responsibility for educating their children about safe and smart online participation without relying on school or health professionals. Actively engaging with their children's digital lives and maintaining open lines of communication can help parents provide more relevant guidance and foster greater digital resilience at home.

EDUCATORS also play a pivotal role in reshaping approaches to young people's online safety and critical thinking skills. Those who took part in the study expressed that they are already stretched by the demands of the standard curriculum, which provides little space for the inclusion of critical thinking skills and offers limited opportunity for teachers to introduce their own ideas into lessons. Without a broader strategy or inclusion of these topics in the curriculum, **learning about digital safety and critical thinking skills** remains at the discretion of the teacher, contributing to skill inequalities among students. Teachers also feel that the responsibility to educate young people on online safety, as well as to manage harmful incidents (e.g. cyberbullying), is overburdening. More collaboration with parents in both education and risk management could support both these groups in delivering complex care. Teachers also lack the critical skills to educate youth in digital literacy, despite recognising the impact of digital technologies on children's school habits and learning abilities. Catching up with tools such as AI or short audiovisual content can help teach innovation and make the curriculum more relevant to current students' needs. Integrating these technologies alongside the voices and experiences of young people can ensure that educational materials remain relevant, engaging, and reflective of the fast-changing digital landscape.

PLATFORMS are among the actors that young people want to hold accountable for a safe online environment. Platforms are indeed the most agentic stakeholders, able to **deliver technological solutions and systemic change** within their own ecosystems. Platform owners and designers are expected to develop and refine features that support managing harmful content, such as deleting, reporting or blocking content and users. These features may be designed with input from young users obtained through user testing and ongoing evaluation. Young people already use platform features to manage their online experiences, so further investment in improving these features is essential. Furthermore, young individuals expect online platforms to actively maintain safe environments by monitoring content, communities, and user interactions. Particular emphasis should be placed on areas such as the toxic manosphere, instances of hate speech, and mental health forums, ensuring that responses to harmful activities are systematic and that the spread of harmful content or communities is effectively prevented. Platforms can provide features and products for parents and teachers that facilitate parental monitoring and educational innovation by offering user-friendly tools designed for adults who may find rapid technological development and complex tools challenging.

The final group of stakeholders capable of change are **policymakers** who can support **systemic efforts by enacting evidence-based legislation and policies** that prioritise the well-being and digital rights of young people. Creating frameworks that encourage ongoing dialogue, promote media literacy, and address emerging risks promptly are crucial to advancing the agenda of creating a sustainable, safe, and inclusive Internet. Systemic changes that should be implemented include developing comprehensive digital safety strategies at the local, national, and international levels; funding research into the evolving digital landscape and youth needs; and ensuring robust legal regulation of online platforms. Political leadership is crucial in bridging policy gaps, supporting innovation in digital literacy education and platform governance, and engaging all stakeholders in creating policies that advance national and international efforts to enhance online safety and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, fostering international cooperation and mutual learning among countries and diverse stakeholders can help bridge digital inequalities and facilitate the transfer of best practices, thereby strengthening protection for young people worldwide.

Insights from international consultations involving 95 young people, 15 parents, and 15 teachers in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia offer valuable guidance for all stakeholders in **fostering an online environment where youth feel safe, protected, and supported**. These findings can assist parents, educators, technology companies, and policymakers in continually developing their practices to enhance support for young people in the digital space.

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