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YOUNG PEOPLE & SOCIAL MEDIA RISKS IN EUROPE

Exposure, Well-being, Disinformation, Online Safety and the Challenge of Healthier Digital Participation

RESEARCH FOCUS

Social media is embedded in young Europeans' daily lives. The policy challenge is not to frame digital participation as inherently harmful, but to reduce preventable risks while protecting young people's rights to information, expression, participation and connection.

European desk research | September 2026

Executive summary

Social media is now part of the basic social infrastructure of youth life in Europe: communication, identity, entertainment, information, civic expression and peer relationships increasingly move across online and offline environments. The same systems that expand connection and participation can also expose young people to problematic use, cyberbullying, unwanted contact, harmful content, commercial pressure, disinformation and privacy risks.

89.3%	**11%**	**76%**
EU 16-29-year-olds who used online social networks in 2025 (Eurostat).	Adolescents reporting problematic social-media behaviour in WHO/HBSC data, up from 7% in 2018.	16-30-year-olds in the 2025 EP Youth Survey saying they had been exposed to disinformation in the previous seven days.

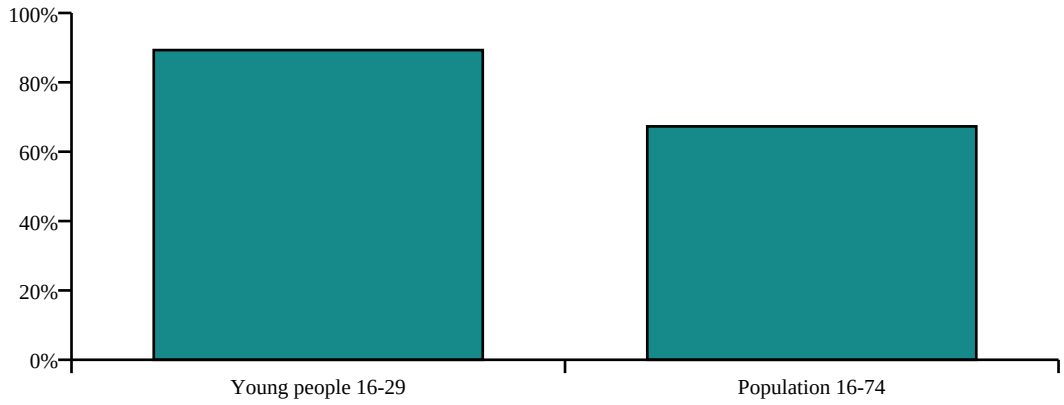
Core finding. The relevant distinction is not simply between 'screen time' and 'no screen time'. Risk depends on design, content, context, vulnerability, intensity, the quality of social interaction and the capacity of young people, families, schools, platforms and institutions to recognise and respond to harm.

This report is an institutional desk-research synthesis based on Eurostat, WHO Europe, the European Parliament and the European Commission's Digital Services Act framework. It does not present original LEA survey data.

SCALE AND NORMALISATION

1. Social media as a youth environment

In 2025, 89.3% of people aged 16-29 in the EU reported participating in online social networks, compared with 67.3% of the population aged 16-74. In 19 of the 27 EU Member States, more than 90% of young people used social networks. Cyprus recorded 98.3%, Czechia 97.2%, Denmark 96.9% and Finland 96.6%; Italy recorded 80.3%.



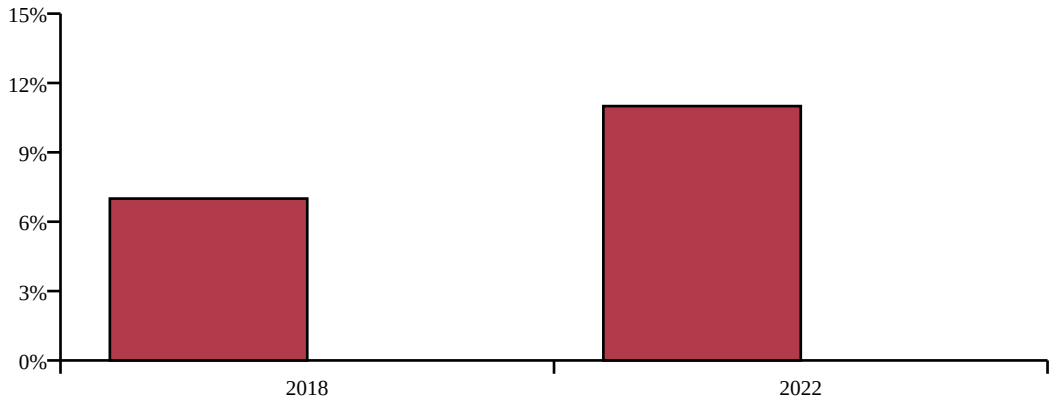
Participation in online social networks, EU, 2025. Source: Eurostat, ICT use by households and individuals.

Daily internet use is even more universal: Eurostat reported that 97% of EU 16-29-year-olds used the internet every day in 2024. Social-media policy is therefore youth policy: online environments are not peripheral spaces but routine contexts for learning, relationships, identity and participation.

A GROWING MINORITY AT RISK

2. Problematic social-media use

WHO Europe's Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study surveyed almost 280,000 adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 across 44 countries and regions in Europe, central Asia and Canada in 2022. It found that 11% showed signs of problematic social-media behaviour, up from 7% in 2018.



Adolescents reporting problematic social-media behaviour: 7% in 2018 and 11% in 2022. Source: WHO Europe / HBSC.

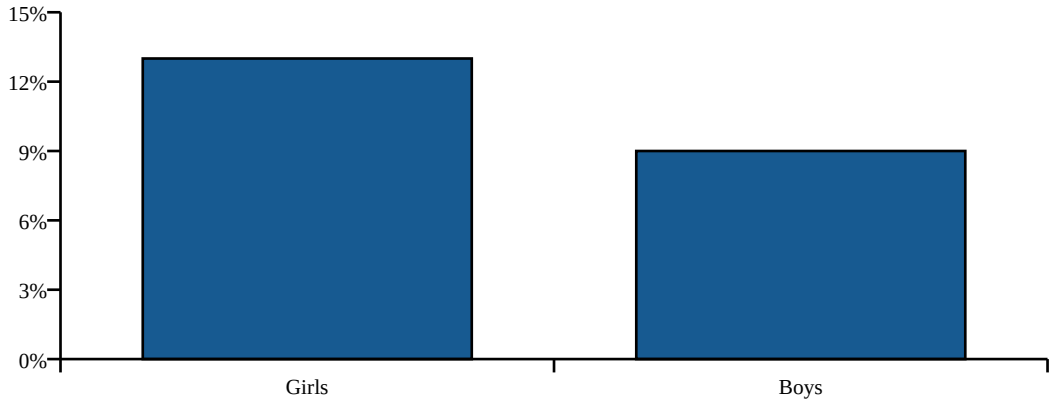
WHO defines problematic social-media use through addiction-like symptoms such as difficulty controlling use, withdrawal, neglect of other activities and negative consequences in daily life. This is not equivalent to saying that frequent use is itself an addiction or disorder.

The same evidence found that 36% of adolescents reported continuous online contact with friends. Constant connectivity can support belonging and social support, but it can also make disengagement difficult and extend peer pressure beyond school hours.

RISK IS NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

3. Gender and age differences

WHO/HBSC data show important gender differences. Problematic social-media use was reported by 13% of girls and 9% of boys. Continuous online contact was highest among 15-year-old girls, at 44%.



Problematic social-media behaviour by gender in WHO/HBSC 2022 data.

These differences should not be interpreted as evidence that social media causes all observed gender gaps in well-being. WHO's wider evidence also shows differences in school pressure, family support and well-being. Digital risks interact with existing social conditions rather than operating in isolation.

Prevention implication: universal digital-safety measures should be combined with targeted support for groups showing higher exposure or vulnerability, without stigmatising young users.

ASSOCIATION IS NOT SIMPLE CAUSATION

4. Mental health and well-being

WHO Europe links problematic social-media behaviour with lower mental and social well-being, sleep disturbance and other negative outcomes. Its 2026 mental-health fact sheet reports that more than one in ten adolescents show signs of problematic social-media behaviour and highlights wider concerns around youth mental health.

However, the relationship between social media and mental health is complex. Young people experiencing loneliness, distress or exclusion may use social media differently; positive online relationships can provide support; and outcomes vary by platform design, content, personal circumstances and type of engagement.

Key well-being pathways to monitor

- **Sleep:** late-night use, notifications and emotionally activating content may interfere with routines and recovery.
- **Social comparison:** highly curated content can intensify comparison around appearance, lifestyle, success and popularity.
- **Belonging:** online communities can reduce isolation but can also amplify exclusion or group pressure.
- **Attention and self-regulation:** highly engaging design can make intentional stopping more difficult for some users.
- **Offline displacement:** risk increases when digital activity persistently displaces sleep, physical activity, learning or supportive face-to-face relationships.

WHEN CONNECTION BECOMES EXPOSURE

5. Cyberbullying, harassment and unwanted contact

The European Commission's 2025 guidelines on the protection of minors under the Digital Services Act identify cyberbullying and unwanted contact from strangers among the online risks requiring platform-level attention. The guidelines also address grooming, harmful content, problematic and addictive behaviours and harmful commercial practices.

Online harm can be persistent because content can be copied, shared, searched and reintroduced into new contexts. A school conflict may continue at home; harassment can move across platforms; and a victim may be exposed to an audience far larger than the original peer group.

A prevention system should distinguish

- **Conflict** from repeated intimidation, humiliation or targeting.
- **Unwanted contact** from consensual social interaction.
- **Peer aggression** from grooming or manipulation by adults.
- **One-off content exposure** from algorithmically repeated or intentionally targeted harmful material.
- **Reporting mechanisms** from actual resolution: a button is not sufficient if response pathways are slow, opaque or ineffective.

FROM EXPOSURE TO RESILIENCE

6. Disinformation and the youth information environment

The European Parliament's 2025 Youth Survey found that social media was the primary source of information on political and social issues for 42% of EU respondents aged 16-30, ahead of television at 39%. It also found that 76% believed they had been exposed to disinformation during the previous seven days, while 70% were confident they could recognise it.

42%	76%	70%
Social media as primary source of political/social information among 16-30-year-olds.	Reported perceived exposure to disinformation in the previous seven days.	Reported confidence in recognising disinformation.

High confidence does not necessarily guarantee accurate identification. Media literacy should therefore combine source evaluation, verification habits, understanding of recommendation systems, awareness of synthetic and manipulated media, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty before sharing.

Democratic implication: youth social-media safety is not only a health or child-protection issue. It is also an information-integrity and citizenship issue.

7. Privacy, data and commercial pressure

Social platforms are also commercial environments. Personalisation, advertising, influencer marketing, engagement optimisation and data collection can shape what young people see and how long they remain online. The EU's regulatory approach increasingly recognises that minors require a high level of privacy, safety and security.

The Commission's DSA guidelines on protection of minors recommend a risk-based and privacy-by-design approach. The framework seeks to protect minors without unnecessarily restricting their rights to participation, information and freedom of expression.

Key risk areas

- **Profiling and personalisation:** young users may not fully understand how behavioural data shape recommendations.
- **Commercial influence:** advertising, influencer content and persuasive design can blur entertainment and marketing.
- **Default visibility:** privacy settings and discoverability can affect exposure to strangers or unwanted audiences.
- **Location and identity signals:** seemingly ordinary posts may reveal routines, school, home area or other sensitive context.
- **Dark or persuasive patterns:** interface design can make disengagement, privacy choices or refusal harder than continued use.

8. The EU response

The Digital Services Act provides the central EU regulatory framework for online-platform accountability. In July 2025, the European Commission published guidelines on the protection of minors to support a high level of privacy, safety and security on platforms accessible to children and teenagers.

The guidelines identify measures addressing addictive design, cyberbullying, harmful content and unwanted contact, among other risks. They apply to online platforms accessible to minors, with an exception for micro and small enterprises. The Commission describes the measures as a non-exhaustive reference for assessing compliance with DSA obligations.

This marks an important shift from placing responsibility almost entirely on young people and parents toward recognising **platform design and governance** as part of the prevention environment.

WHY DIGITAL LITERACY REMAINS ESSENTIAL

9. Beyond prohibition

Regulation can reduce systemic risk, but young people also need practical competences to navigate environments that will continue to evolve. A prevention strategy based only on prohibition risks becoming obsolete as platforms, devices and behaviours change.

Capability	What young people should be able to do
Information literacy	Check sources, recognise uncertainty, compare claims and pause before sharing.
Privacy literacy	Understand visibility, permissions, account security, location and data-sharing choices.
Social resilience	Recognise harassment, coercion, manipulation and unhealthy group dynamics.
Self-regulation	Notice when use is displacing sleep, learning, movement or offline relationships.
Commercial literacy	Identify advertising, influencer marketing, persuasive design and monetisation incentives.
Help-seeking	Know how to block, report, preserve evidence and reach trusted adults or specialist services.
Civic literacy	Participate online while respecting rights, pluralism, evidence and democratic norms.

A BALANCED EUROPEAN PREVENTION MODEL

10. The LEA SAFE framework

S - SYSTEMS	Require safer platform design, meaningful privacy defaults, transparent reporting and risk mitigation for minors.
A - AWARENESS	Build media, privacy, commercial and AI literacy before problems become crises.
F - FAMILIES & FRONTLINE	Equip families, schools, youth workers and services with practical, non-alarmist guidance and referral pathways.
E - EMPOWERMENT	Protect young people's agency: teach them to participate, create, organise and communicate online safely rather than treating them only as passive victims.

The SAFE framework avoids two extremes: treating all social-media use as dangerous, or treating harms as problems that individual young users should solve alone. Prevention requires both capable users and accountable systems.

A YOUTH DIGITAL-SAFETY AGENDA

11. Ten recommendations for Europe

01 Make **safety and privacy by design** the default for services likely to be used by minors.

02 Evaluate platform safety using outcomes, not only the existence of reporting tools or policy documents.

03 Integrate media, AI, privacy and commercial literacy into education and youth work from an early age.

04 Train teachers and youth workers to recognise problematic use, cyberbullying, grooming and escalating online harassment.

05 Create clear pathways between schools, families, mental-health services, law enforcement and specialist online-safety services.

06 Support parents with practical guidance that avoids both panic and unrealistic expectations of constant surveillance.

07 Fund youth-led digital citizenship initiatives so young people participate in designing safer online cultures.

08 Require accessible explanations of recommendation, advertising and privacy systems for younger users.

09 Strengthen research that distinguishes active, passive, supportive, harmful and problematic forms of social-media use.

10 Measure digital well-being alongside young people's rights to connection, expression, information and participation.

SUGGESTED LEA INDICATORS

12. Measuring risk and prevention

Dimension	Illustrative indicators
Exposure	Social-network use; harmful-content encounters; unwanted contact; cyberbullying experience.
Problematic use	Loss of control, withdrawal-like experiences, displacement of important activities and negative daily consequence
Well-being	Sleep, life satisfaction, loneliness, school functioning and perceived social support.
Information resilience	Verification habits; recognition of uncertainty; perceived and tested ability to identify misinformation.
Privacy & safety	Use of privacy settings, strong authentication, blocking/reporting and safe account-recovery practices.
Help-seeking	Knowledge and use of trusted adults, school/youth services, platform reporting and specialist support.
Platform response	Time to action, repeat exposure after reporting, transparency and user understanding of outcomes.
Empowerment	Positive creation, civic participation, supportive communities and young people's role in co-designing solutions.

Measurement principle: time online alone is an incomplete indicator. Evaluation should distinguish what young people do online, why they do it, what they encounter, whether they can disengage, and whether digital activity supports or undermines functioning and well-being.

WHAT EUROPE STILL NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND

13. Research gaps

- **Causality:** more longitudinal evidence separating correlation, vulnerability and platform effects.
- **Platform-specific effects:** risks differ by design, content format, recommendation systems and social norms.
- **Age transitions:** stronger evidence on how risks change from early adolescence into young adulthood.
- **AI-mediated social media:** synthetic media, conversational agents, recommender systems and generative content are changing the risk landscape.
- **Protective factors:** research should study not only harm but why many young people use social media intensively without problematic outcomes.
- **Intervention effectiveness:** independent evidence is needed on which platform, school, family and youth-work interventions actually reduce harm.
- **Cross-country comparability:** Europe needs consistent measures while preserving the ability to understand national and cultural differences.

LEA INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

14. Conclusion

Social media is neither a single technology nor a single risk. It is an ecosystem in which young people learn, socialise, create, consume, organise and form identities. European policy should therefore resist simplistic narratives that portray young people either as helpless victims of technology or as fully autonomous consumers who alone bear responsibility for managing risk.

The evidence reviewed by LEA points to a dual responsibility. Young people need knowledge, resilience, privacy skills, critical thinking and accessible support. At the same time, platforms and institutions must reduce foreseeable systemic risks, especially where services are designed for or widely used by minors.

Europe's objective should be **healthier digital participation**: preserving the social, educational, creative and democratic opportunities of social media while reducing harmful design, exposure, manipulation and patterns of use that undermine well-being.

LEA POLICY MESSAGE

The goal is not to remove young people from the digital world.

It is to build a digital world in which young people can participate, connect and create without safety, privacy, health and democratic resilience being treated as the price of admission.

Prepared by **LEA - Leadership Engagement Advocacy**
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SELECTED AUTHORITATIVE SOURCES

References and methodological note

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Methodological note. This publication is a desk-research synthesis and does not present original LEA survey data. Age ranges and geographic coverage differ between sources. Eurostat figures cited for social-network use concern EU residents aged 16-29; WHO/HBSC evidence concerns adolescents aged 11, 13 and 15 across 44 countries and regions in Europe, central Asia and Canada; European Parliament Youth Survey findings concern EU respondents aged 16-30.

Interpretation. Associations between social-media behaviour and well-being should not automatically be interpreted as proof of direct causation. 'Problematic social-media use' refers to the specific HBSC measurement framework and should not be equated with ordinary frequent use.

Use: policy, youth work, education, prevention, digital citizenship and advocacy. This publication is not medical advice or an individual diagnostic tool.