

POLICY BRIEF

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Digital Safety and Mental Health in Youth: Building Safer Digital Spaces

Developed by Youth Participants from Kosovo* and Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Introduction

Digital technologies have become an essential part of young people's daily lives, creating opportunities for learning, communication, creativity, and social connection. At the same time, young people face increasing challenges related to online safety, digital wellbeing, and mental health.

Through youth workshops, group discussions, and collaborative activities, young participants from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina identified the most pressing challenges affecting young people in digital environments. This policy brief presents their perspectives, identifies key concerns, and provides recommendations for educators, institutions, digital platforms, and youth organizations.

The main message from youth is clear:

“Use social media, don’t let social media use you.”

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Digital safety is a shared responsibility. Young people, parents, schools, institutions, and online platforms all have a role in creating safer and healthier digital environments.

2. Key Digital Safety Challenges Identified by Youth

1. Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying was identified as one of the most serious challenges affecting young people online. It includes harassment, threats, exclusion, impersonation, spreading private information, and sharing harmful content.

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can happen at any time, reach a large audience quickly, and leave a lasting digital footprint.

Impact on young people:

- Increased stress, anxiety, and emotional distress
- Reduced self-confidence and self-esteem
- Social withdrawal and loneliness
- Lower academic performance
- Negative effects on mental health and relationships

Young participants emphasized that online harm can have real-life consequences and that victims should not face these situations alone.

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2. Privacy and Data Security Risks

Young people identified the protection of personal information as a major concern in digital spaces. Every online activity, including searches, posts, and interactions, creates digital data that can potentially be collected, misused, or exploited.

Main risks include:

- Identity theft
- Unauthorized use of personal information
- Unsafe sharing of private content
- Online scams and phishing attempts

Youth highlighted the importance of improving digital literacy so that users understand how to protect their information and make safer decisions online.

3. Social Media Pressure and Digital Addiction

Young participants discussed how social media platforms can negatively influence mental wellbeing when used excessively.

Challenges identified include:

- Fear of missing out (FOMO)
- Pressure to appear perfect online
- Constant comparison with others
- Excessive screen time
- Reduced face-to-face communication

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Possible consequences:

- Increased anxiety and emotional exhaustion
- Reduced self-esteem
- Sleep problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Weakened relationships with family and peers

Youth emphasized the need to promote healthy digital habits and encourage a balanced relationship with technology.

4. Misleading Content and Online Misinformation

Young people also identified exposure to false and harmful information as a growing challenge.

Examples include:

- Fake news and misleading headlines
- Online scams
- Manipulated images and deepfakes
- Harmful narratives and misinformation

Without strong critical thinking and digital literacy skills, young users may struggle to identify reliable information and protect themselves from manipulation.

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3. Groups Most Affected

Young participants identified several groups that require particular attention:

Teenagers and Students

Young people with high online activity are more exposed to cyberbullying, social pressure, and online risks.

Young Social Media Users

Users who frequently share personal information online may face increased privacy and security risks.

Young People Experiencing Mental Health Challenges

Digital pressure, online comparison, and negative online experiences can increase feelings of anxiety, isolation, and emotional exhaustion.

4. Impact on Mental Health and Relationships

Youth participants highlighted that digital challenges affect not only online experiences but also everyday life.

Key impacts include:

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- Increased anxiety and stress
- Reduced empathy and communication skills
- Lower concentration and academic difficulties
- Reduced offline social interaction
- Strained relationships with family and peers

Young people emphasized that digital wellbeing should be considered an important part of overall mental health.

5. Youth-Led Recommendations

Based on discussions and group work, young participants developed the following recommendations:

1. Introduce Digital Safety and Wellbeing Education in Schools

Schools should provide regular education on:

- Cyberbullying prevention
- Online privacy and security
- Critical thinking and misinformation
- Healthy social media habits
- Digital wellbeing and mental health

Digital safety education should be integrated into learning environments from an early age.

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2. Strengthen Anti-Cyberbullying Measures

Social media platforms should:

- Improve reporting mechanisms
- Respond faster to harmful content
- Strengthen protection against harassment and abuse
- Promote safer online communities

Young people should have accessible tools to report and address harmful online behavior.

3. Support Youth Mental Health Programs

Institutions and youth organizations should create more opportunities for:

- Mental health awareness activities
- Peer support groups in schools
- Youth discussions and community events
- Access to professional support when needed

Young people need safe spaces where they can discuss digital challenges and emotional wellbeing.

4. Promote Healthy Digital Habits

Families, schools, and communities should encourage:

- Balanced screen time
- Healthy use of social media
- Open communication about online experiences

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- Responsible digital behavior

Young people should be supported to use technology positively rather than allowing technology to negatively affect their lives.

6. Suggested Youth Engagement Activities

Young participants proposed the following activities to strengthen digital safety awareness:

School-Based Support Groups

Creating safe spaces where students can discuss online challenges and support each other.

Social Media Awareness Campaigns

Developing youth-led campaigns promoting safe and responsible digital behavior.

Educational Workshops

Organizing interactive sessions on cybersecurity, mental health, and online wellbeing.

Community Events and Youth Discussions

Bringing together young people, educators, parents, and institutions to discuss digital challenges and solutions.

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7. Key Message from Youth

“The weakest link in the digital space is the human being.”

Digital safety is not only a technological issue. It depends on awareness, responsibility, empathy, and cooperation between all members of society.

Young people are not only users of digital spaces they are active contributors to creating safer, healthier, and more responsible online communities.

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