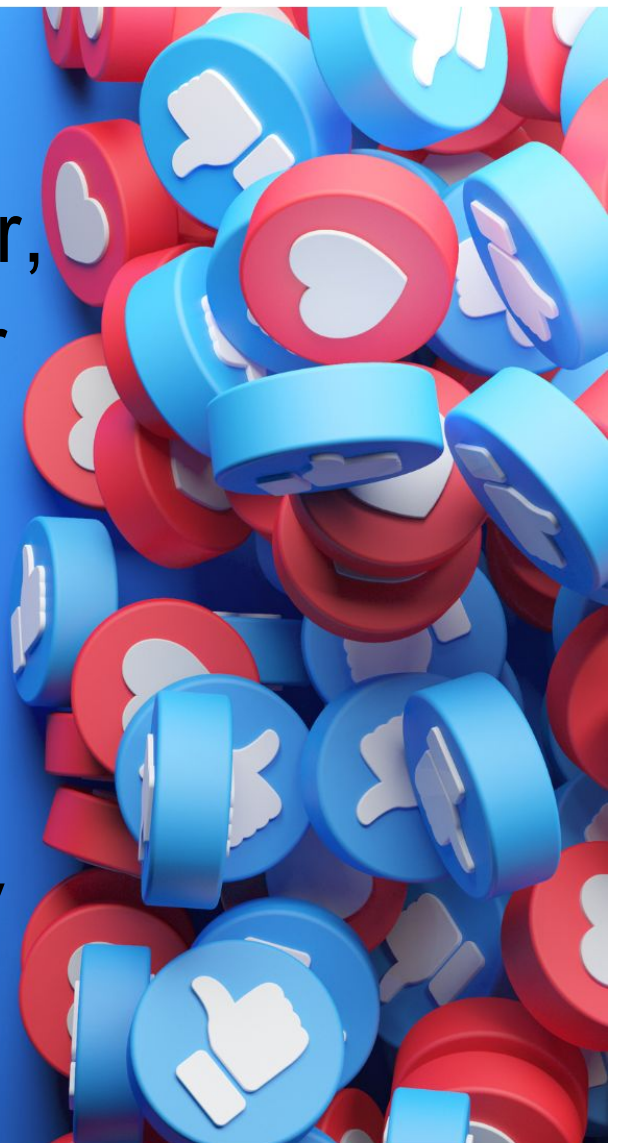


## Youth online behavior, risks and avenues for mitigating them

Transnational report: Summary





Project Title: **Action-Based Approach in Addressing and Mitigating Risks of Young People in Online Social Networks**

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# **Youth online behavior, risk and avenues for mitigating them**

## **Transnational report**

### **Summary**

This report addressed the topic of online risks associated to the online presence of young people (16-30 years old) and the use of online social networks, in the context of the post Covid-19 pandemic in six European countries: Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy and Romania. Specifically, it explores the online behavior of young people, their attitudes towards the main identified risks, preventive and risky behaviors, incidence of the manifestation of these risks, critical reading ability, together with other relevant factors. Moreover, the study explores the attitudes of young people regarding global threats such as pandemics, international politics, armed conflicts, refugees, as well as the risk factors concerning fake news and disinformation.

The objective of the research was to identify the main risks associated to young people's online presence, as well as the factors which enable or hinder these risks, in order to create the best educational tools for combating the risks. Therefore, the ultimate goal of the research was to collect the relevant data for the development of an online game that teaches young people how to prevent and mitigate the identified risks and a Capacity Building programme (OER) for youth workers and youth trainers, in order to improve their capacity to address the identified risks. This study has been elaborated within the RISE project: Action-Based Approach in Addressing and Mitigating Risks of Young People in Online Social Networks, financed by European Union's Erasmus+ Programme, Strategic Partnerships - Key Action 2, project number 2021-1-RO01-KA220-YOU-000028688.

The report is based on both qualitative and quantitative data, gathered from all six countries in the period of October- December 2022, namely by an online survey completed by 348 young people (16-18 years old) and 30 interviews with youth workers and trainers from the six countries. The data was collected by national experts contracted by Center for Not-for-Profit Law Association in Romania, Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (Greece), Vitale Tecnologie Comunicazione - Viteco SRL (Italy), Learning for Integration ry (Finland), BK Consult GbR (Germany) and Synthesis Center for Research and Education (Cyprus).

Our research confirms that young people spend a significant amount of time online, as 86% of respondents access the internet daily and they tend to be constantly connected. Youth online presence has increased during the Covid19 pandemic and it has been maintained in its aftermath. This significantly increases the chances of young people becoming victims of online threats in the absence of educational resources and programs aimed at teaching them how to avoid them.

Online social networks are one of the key online activities of youth, the most popular being Instagram (favored by 41% of respondents) and Facebook (favored by 30% of respondents), followed by TikTok and Twitter (9%). Teenagers often use social platforms for entertainment and for making new acquaintances, which makes them more likely to become victims of online abuse, while young adults tend to use social networks for keeping in contact with existing connections.

The main risks associated to the online presence of young people identified by the research are the following: 1. fake news and disinformation, 2. cyberbullying, 3. identity theft, 4. image-based sexual abuse and online gambling and gaming. Potential consequences of experiencing such incidents include significant psychological, social and/ or financial damage for the victim, as well as potential legal sanctions for the perpetrator. The report describes these phenomena, their specific patterns of manifestation, effects and regulation in the countries surveyed. Also, it provides a comprehensive coverage of the strategies to combat them, in order to improve the wellbeing of young people throughout Europe.

In terms of risky online behavior, 69% of our respondents have shared private information with online-only acquaintances at least once. Most often, this information includes identification information and location data, but also personal or intimate details or even intimate photos or videos. This opens the door for multiple online threats, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online impersonation, outing/doxing, identity theft and revenge pornography. The main reasons for such risky behavior relate to young people's assimilation of online socializing to face-to-face bonding and their limited awareness about online risks, as well as the false sense of being protected by the screen.

The first risk identified is that of cyber-bullying, which is a repetitive and unprovoked aggressive behavior causing distress to the victim, as well as a power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator. It also prevents the victim from expressing his/ her opinion, affects their self-esteem and causes humiliation and shame. Online bullying deepens the inequality between the victim and the perpetrator, due the ability of the perpetrator to conceal their identity. Cyberbullying includes incident such as online harassment (trolling, threats, mobbing), cyberstalking, doxing, impersonation or exclusion.

Cyberbullying, in all different forms of manifestation, is the most commonly experienced type of incident, reported by 28% of young people in our sample. Online threats have also been reported by 20% of German respondents and 10% of participants from Cyprus, Finland and Italy. Such incidents can have severe consequences on youth mental health.

Another important risk associated with youth online presence is that of falling victim to and contributing to the dissemination of fake news and disinformation. This risk consists of the viral spread of fake information online, on topics of general interest, such as political social or health-related subjects. This leads to increasing social polarization and the emergence of echo-chambers, turning legitimate democratic debate into a competition between alternative truths. In addition to hampering constructive dialogue, the experience of the Covid-pandemic has shown that disinformation can also pose health risks, if people disregard health measures because they believe in conspiracy theory and do not trust public authorities. Along with psychological factors, political ideology and other aspects related to young people's profile, critical reading and one's level of attentiveness in reading the news have been the most relevant factors in predicting a person's likelihood in believing and/ or spreading fake news.

In our research sample, about 4% of people from Italy, 6% from Cyprus, 7% from Finland, 8% from Greece, 14% from Romania and 26% from Germany supported conspiracy theories and were thus likely to become victims of fake news and disinformation and to pass it in. Also, significant number of respondents were neutral to such disinformation, which means they are

also at risk. While not all variables that could affect young people's likelihood to believe in fake news could be tested, critical reading and the thoroughness in reading the news did play a significant role.

Thirdly, online identity theft is another considerable risk, as it can lead to significant financial and/ or professional consequences, when perpetrators steal money from the victim or commit abuses in the victim's name. The main forms of identity theft include: phishing, hacking, social media cons and identity spoofing. Incidents of identity theft ranged from 5% to 11% in the countries analyzed and cases of online impersonation were not very frequent in our research. Such cases were most often reported by young people from Finland and Italy. Incidents of outing and doxxing were also present but rarely reported.

Image-based sexual abuse is an additional risk associated with accessing the online sphere, generally taking the form of revenge porn, which represents the sharing of explicit photos of the victim without her consent, leading to humiliation and even depression, or the form of sharing sexually explicit picture (generally of a male organ) to a person without her consent which also leads to humiliation and harassment. Fortunately, incidents of revenge pornography were rarely reported by the participants in this research. However, this remains an important risk for young people, given the widespread practice of sending nude pictures/ videos, the lack of awareness among youth regarding the associated risks and in some cases also the lack of legal protection for the victims. Almost half of respondents (44%) have shared intimate pictures/ videos with friends or partners and some youth workers estimate that the actual figure is around 60-70% of young women. Women and girls are much more likely (than men) to experience pressure from their partners and peers to provide such content.

Finally, addiction to online gambling or gaming is also an online risk for young people, according to the literature, as it can cause significant financial and emotional consequences to the victim and to his or her family. Gambling addictions are facilitated by the online environment, which make it easier for players to access the game anytime, as well as by the gaps in regulation and the specific instruments which online games utilize to attract customers (for example loot boxes). Fortunately, online gambling addiction is also not a widespread phenomenon among the youth surveyed, as only 9% of respondents could be considered problematic gamblers, with German participants being the most gambling-savvy. Men are more likely (than women) to become addicted, as they tend to show more interest in sports and to experience more social pressure to earn money fast.

In order to prevent and combat the identified risks, young people and young workers and trainers should be provided training and educational tools. Capacity-building programs should include thematic training sessions on sex education, gender equality, internet use, cybersecurity, soft skills and fact-checking. The main subjects to be addressed include: social platforms and online risks for young people, risky online behavior, technical information about securing online accounts, addressing youth vulnerability and disinformation. Also, youth trainers/ workers should be empowered to develop soft skills in youth and to establish the trainer-trainee relationship.

In order to successfully reach their target audience, the trainings should include participatory methods and non-formal education techniques (for example: simulations, role-play games, group work), as well as practical examples and real-life scenarios. Moreover, trainers/

facilitators should be empathic and encourage all participants to share their views and experiences and create a safe environment. When possible, the trainings should also include persons who experienced the manifestation of these risks or vloggers/ influencers, as guest speakers.

Online games used for preventing the manifestation of these risks should address the identified risks individually, by using real-life scenarios that young people can relate to, provide the players with the opportunity to make choices and present the outcome(s) of their choices, as well as include a debriefing phase after each scenario. From a technical perspective, such a game should include different levels, have an attractive graphic design and be optimized for computers as well as for smartphones. Also, the game prototype should be tested by young people from different countries and different settings.