

# Youth and social media

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## **Abstract**

*Most young people in the EU use the internet daily and rely heavily on social media for political and social information. Some Member States are considering banning social media for under-15s due to risks such as disinformation, hate speech, violent content and harmful online communities, identified in the EU's 4C model. The European Commission plans new measures, including an action plan against cyberbullying, a digital fairness act addressing addictive design, and a 2026 review of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive to better regulate influencers and protect minors.*

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## 1. Introduction

Today's adolescents represent the first generation of **social natives** (who grew up in the age of the social, participatory web; differing from digital natives, who grew up before the rise of social networks). They generally spend more time online than other age groups and are key **early adopters** of new platforms and technologies. Digital devices provide novel opportunities for learning, creativity, social connection, engagement and entertainment – but at the same time raise concerns about potential negative effects on adolescents' wellbeing. Young people are **especially vulnerable** to the potential negative effects of online platform use, as they are still developing on personal, social, and cognitive levels.

In 2024, 97 % of young people in the EU **reported** using the internet every day. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) **suggests** that, across almost all OECD countries, at least half of 15-year-olds spent 30 hours or more per week on digital devices. In all EU countries, young people are much more likely to participate in social network activities than the total population: creating a user profile and posting messages was widespread practice for 88 % of 16 to 29-year-olds, compared

with 65 % of the total population. Between the ages of 9 and 16, the average time spent on social media rises significantly: on average, 14 to 16-year-olds spend nearly twice as much time online than 9 to 10-year-olds.

According to a [policy brief](#) by the Joint Research Centre, on a typical weekday (in 2022), 96 % of 15-year-olds in the EU engaged in social media activities, with 37 % spending over three hours per day browsing on social media platforms. Excessive social media use (more than three hours per day) is associated with negative mental health outcomes, specifically depression and anxiety. The OECD defines problematic use of social media as struggling to manage time spent online, perceiving digital media use as



disruptive to daily activities, experiencing conflict with parents or friends due to time spent online, or feeling bad or dissatisfied about digital media habits. In a **study** carried out in France among young people aged between 13 and 25, more than 8 in 10 reported spending too much time on social media, with an even higher rate among young women (88 %).

According to the 2024 Eurobarometer **youth survey**, social media<sup>2</sup> platforms have also become young people's top source for information on political and social issues.<sup>3</sup> In the 2025 Eurobarometer **social media survey**, 65 % of respondents aged between 15 and 24 chose social media as their main source of information, while 40 % of all age groups did so. Furthermore, 74 % of 15 to 24-year-olds follow influencers.

Online (social media) platforms play an increasingly significant role in people's personal lives and societies. A World Health Organisation (WHO) **report** published in 2024 found that 36 % of adolescents surveyed in Europe, Central Asia and Canada reported constant online contact with friends, using social media platforms “almost all the time throughout

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2 Social media **refers to** online platforms and services that enable users to create user profiles and connect their profiles with other users for the purposes of sharing user-generated content. In 2023, the **most used** platforms by young people in the EU (15 to 24-year-olds) were Instagram (used by 76 %), YouTube (69 %), WhatsApp (60 %) and TikTok (55 %).

3 Mentioned by 42 % of respondents aged between 16 and 30 surveyed in the EU, and followed by television (mentioned by 39 %) and online press and/or news platforms (26 %). Instagram was mentioned as the most commonly used (47 %), followed by TikTok (39 %) and YouTube (37 %).



Online platforms are still relatively new phenomena and in constant evolution, meaning that their potential impact on youth development is still largely unknown

the day". More than 1 in 10 adolescents (11 %) showed signs of problematic social media use, reporting addiction-like symptoms, with problematic use prevalence higher among girls than boys (13 % vs 9 %).

Digital technologies and online platforms are still relatively new phenomena and in constant evolution, meaning that their potential impact on youth development is still largely unknown. Ongoing research into the **potential risks and benefits** of online platforms is therefore essential.

## 2. 4C model for mapping risks

The CORE pan-European knowledge platform, funded under Horizon 2020, has developed a theoretical framework, the **4C model**, to map the potential risks to children associated with online platforms. These risks are divided into four categories: content, contact, conduct, and contract. Each category represents an aspect where online platforms may undermine the healthy development of children and adolescents. In addition to the "four Cs", the model also identifies cross-cutting risks that span multiple categories, such as privacy risks and impacts on mental health. This highlights the interconnected nature of the four categories: risks rarely occur in isolation and often interact simultaneously.

### Content: Exposure to harmful content

Content risk includes exposure to, and engagement with content that is potentially harmful to young people.

According to the OECD, over a third of 15-year-olds (36 %) report encountering upsetting age-inappropriate content online.

## Sexually explicit content

Young people are often exposed to sexually explicit content online from an early age, including online pornography. In the 2020 **EU Kids online survey**, 61 % of adolescents reported having encountered sexual content online at the age of 15-16 years. Boys are generally exposed at an even younger age than girls; studies estimate that almost half of 13-year-old boys have already come across online pornography. Furthermore, teenage boys are more likely to be **exposed to** online sexual material at a much higher frequency. **Data** from 2024 shows that almost 40 % of 12 to 17-year-olds in France visit adult (pornography) sites in a given month.

Even if online content is not always necessarily harmful for its sexual nature as such, it can cause harm due to the way sexuality is portrayed. Research shows, for instance, that almost all mainstream (heterosexual) pornographic content **portrays** some form of sexual violence against women; 1 in 8 first-time visitors to pornographic websites are presented with material promoting explicit sexual violence. Consumption of such content can instil negative gender stereotypes in young people whose cognitive capacities are still developing. Viewing online pornography is also associated with an increased probability that boys will send sexual images or messages.

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## Body image

Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok create a strong emphasis on appearance, external validation, and social comparison, due to their image-based nature and the prominence of visible engagement metrics (for example the number of likes and views). In their developmental stage, adolescents **typically attach** great importance to peer approval. Young people, especially girls who already experience more societal pressure regarding their appearance, are therefore particularly sensitive to this online dynamic.

However, the extent to which image-based social media are harmful to young people is highly context-dependent.



Research indicates some correlation between the use of image-based social media platforms, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviours. More time spent on social media is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms for both boys and girls, but the effect is much larger in girls. At the same time, factors such as seeing diverse body types online can help mitigate a negative impact or even improve body image among young users.

More than half of the young people surveyed in a 2024 **study** in France said they are often exposed to disturbing content on social networks, including content showing idealised bodies or promoting eating disorders. Of young women aged between 16 and 21, 75 % reported feeling uncomfortable, sad, demoralised or affected in their self-esteem by this content.

In October 2025, Amnesty International published the results of an experiment carried out in France, unveiling how the TikTok algorithm was luring children into deeper depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation, endangering their mental health. Amnesty created three fake accounts (two girls and one boy, all 13 years of age). In less than an hour of scrolling through TikTok's "For You" feed, the teen accounts were introduced to depressive content and, within 3-4 hours, accounts were shown videos romanticising suicide or showing young people planning to end their lives, including information on suicide methods.

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## Disinformation

With the rise of **generative artificial intelligence** (AI) allowing the production of *pseudo* texts and **deepfakes** that are increasingly hard to distinguish from real content, online misinformation will only continue to increase. Two-thirds (66 %) of respondents to a 2025 Eurobarometer **social media survey** thought they had been exposed to disinformation and fake news at least sometime over the past seven days. Although just over 6 in 10 respondents felt confident of their ability to recognise disinformation (61 %), about 3 in 10 did not.

According to the 2024 **Eurostat youth survey**, more than three-quarters (76 %) of young people surveyed thought they had been exposed to disinformation and fake news over the past seven days, while 70 % of the participants were confident of their capability to recognise it. However, people often tend to **overestimate** their ability to detect false information. Young people may be particularly vulnerable to online disinformation due to a lack of essential **media literacy skills** and their more frequent reliance on social media as a primary news source, rather than traditional outlets such as (online) newspapers or television news.

Young people may be particularly vulnerable to online disinformation due to their more frequent reliance on social media as a primary news source

## Online hatred

**Hateful content** is a recurring phenomenon online, especially on platforms that lack clear and transparent community standards and moderation. According to a 2024 Eurostat **survey**, almost half

(49 %) of 16 to 29-year-olds reported encountering hostile or degrading online messages towards individuals or groups of people. "Political or social views" scored highest (35 %) as a reason for being targeted, with "sexual orientation (LGBTIQ identities)" coming second (32 %). Victimised young people tend to demonstrate a "chilling effect": strong discouragement of self-expression, inhibiting democratic participation, particularly among **minority youth** who are often the target of online hate.

Young people themselves are **raising alarm** about the amount of violent content to which they are exposed on social media. The Youth Select Committee, a parliamentary group of 14 to 19-year-olds in the United Kingdom, **investigated** links between social media and youth violence, concluding that the government needs to do more to protect young people from violent and harmful content online. Their concern was that some young people were becoming desensitised to glorified violence online, because of how often it is shown to them. Regular exposure to online violence risks its use to resolve disputes in the real world becoming normalised.

Recent research **cautions** that social media is "pushing" distressing, violent content to children, including scenes from wars, shootings, stabbings and car crashes. Horrific images that they have seen **stick in their minds**. Surveys also find that the time users spend viewing content posted by their friends is falling on several platforms, with algorithmically recommended posts increasingly dominating users' feeds.

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## Contact: Risks of potentially harmful contact

Perhaps the greatest source of concern among both parents and young people regarding online activity is the threat posed by adults attempting to coerce minors into sexual acts. This practice is often referred to as grooming and commonly involves manipulative adults gaining the trust of young people to gradually pressure them into increasingly sexual behaviour.

A global evidence **review** conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) found that 12-17 % of surveyed young people had experienced sexual solicitations by adults. Girls and people in late adolescence are at a higher risk of adult approaches online. On the other hand, online criminals also **target young males**, soliciting naked pictures of themselves using (often AI-manufactured) fake profiles of "young girls", for the purpose of blackmailing the victims by threatening to send the images to classmates, friends or family if they fail to pay. In some cases, young victims have committed suicide as a result.

## Ideological persuasion

A combination of disinformation and extremism can lead to online radicalisation. A radicalisation process that once unfolded over months or years now typically takes **days or even hours**, largely due to the prevalence of extremist short-form online propaganda.



One form of online extremism gaining traction, especially among adolescent boys, is found within the so-called “manosphere”. The term refers to a loosely connected network of online communities united by the belief that today’s “liberal” society is harmful to men and should be reclaimed by them. The “manosphere” has contributed significantly to the rise of online hatred towards women. A prominent subcategory within this network is the “incel” (involuntary celibate) community. Incels generally **believe** that the freedoms granted to women in recent decades have resulted in a denial of sexual relationships for men. As a result, such actors often harbour deep resentment towards society, and some members have been

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responsible for extreme acts of violence, including mass shootings. Young boys often first encounter the “manosphere” through popular **neo-masculine influencers**. These figures, often operating under a banner of “self-improvement”, play a key role in normalising extreme misogynistic beliefs.

## Conduct: Harmful behaviour

### Cyberbullying

Social media, while serving as an online meeting place for young people, also provide a platform for **cyberbullying**. Unlike “real-world” bullying, which ends when the victim's situation changes, such as when school ends, cyberbullying can continue for its victims at any time. Cyberbullying is often intertwined with offline bullying, as videos about humiliating or beating the victim are often shared online.

Cyberbullying is **increasing** in all OECD countries. On average, 1 in 6 children aged between 11 and 15 reported being cyberbullied in 2021-2022, with significant variation across countries. The OECD also notes that children from low socio-economic status families are more likely to be cyberbullied compared to those from high socio-economic status families. The Joint Research Centre **found** that 49 % of children aged between 10 and 18 in 2020 had experienced at least one form of online aggression or bullying (receiving or circulation of nasty or hurtful messages about them, exclusion from an online activity, receiving threats online).

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## Sexual conduct

'Sexting' (exchanging self-produced sexualised images, messages or videos) has become a widespread phenomenon among adolescents. Many studies fail to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual online sexual contact. Research that does make this distinction shows no negative outcomes for consensual online sexual contact; it can **contribute** to positive sexual experiences for young people. In this light, consensual online sexual contact can be seen as a new but healthy form of sexual self-exploration for adolescents. At the same time, the online nature of consensual interactions may lead to escalation into coercion or other unintended harmful consequences. Online sexual contact can also be non-consensual from the outset – for instance, receiving unsolicited sexually explicit messages or images.

The negative consequences of such contact presents a strong gender-dependent dynamic: girls and women are more likely to receive unsolicited sexual content, to be pressured or even coerced into sending explicit material, and to face a higher risk that their content (such as photos or text messages) is shared publicly by peers. Furthermore, persistent gender norms around sexuality – where male sexuality is encouraged and female sexuality shamed – further amplify the social consequences of such exposure for girls (for example through “slut-shaming”). Members of gender minorities (such as non-binary youth) are also at increased risk.



**Generative AI can create images that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from real photographs, including fake nude images of people, often girls**

A rapidly growing form of online sexual violence is the use of **deepfakes**. Generative AI can create images that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from real photographs, including fake nude images of people, often girls, based on publicly available photos derived from social media. This use of deepfake technology is so **widespread** that approximately 90 % of all AI-generated videos fall into this category. It is estimated that 99 % of the victims are women.

### **Harmful communities**

One of the main appeals of social media is that it enables young people to find like-minded peers and form online communities. Through social media, young people can connect with peers around the world with whom they share hobbies or interests, and members of marginalised groups have an opportunity to meet peers with similar experiences. This can be an important source of support and help reduce feelings of loneliness.

At the same time, online communities can also evolve into echo chambers in which harmful ideas and behaviours are normalised or encouraged. Online communities that romanticise psychiatric problems and associated behaviours or exert peer-pressure to participate are an important example. In the 2020 EU Kids Online survey, 10 % of young people aged between 12 and 16 reported encountering online content about self-harm, 12 % about extreme thinness related to anorexia, and 11 % about experiences of taking drugs.

Naturally, not all mental-health-related online communities are harmful to young people. Such communities can be an important source of useful information and support. However, distinguishing between helpful and harmful communities is not always easy. Even well-meaning online communities can sometimes unintentionally contribute to a process of “co-rumination” among young people.

Social media influencers and celebrities often portray drug use as glamorous part of an elite lifestyle, and social media platforms have become a **significant marketplace** for illegal substances. Drug dealers exploit the ease of creating and discarding accounts to reach a wide audience quickly, while marketing their products directly to teenagers, and then use other, encrypted messenger applications to sell the drugs. A **recent trend** is teenagers – often unknowingly – vaping liquid containing a dangerous and highly addictive synthetic drug, “spice”, easily **sourced through** social media.

Another increasing phenomenon is organised criminals using digital platforms and video games for **hiring or blackmailing** children and adolescents to commit crimes. A March 2025 Europol **report** warns that the internet has become the primary theatre for organised crime, with criminal networks not only involved in cyber-attacks but also in diverse online fraud schemes, online grooming of children, and recruitment of young people across the EU for drug trafficking and other means of criminal exploitation.

**Social media platforms have become a significant marketplace for illegal substances**



## Contract: Commercial interests

Young people are an important target group for advertisers, as they represent both current and future consumers; this can lead to conflict between young people's wellbeing and platforms' commercial interests.

## Addictive nature

Social media companies aim to maximise engagement and time spent on their platform in order to collect personal data. This activity then allows them to push targeted advertisements and earn money. It is therefore in the best interests of internet companies to maximise the time users spend on their platforms. Over the past decade, companies have introduced and refined various addictive mechanisms to make their platforms more enticing to users. Common examples include the use of rewards (e.g. constantly refreshing content), social rewards (e.g. likes and streaks), the removal of stopping cues (e.g. the endless scroll), and the implementation of self-learning, adaptive algorithms (e.g. personalised content feeds).

**The addictive nature of online platforms can lead users to develop an addiction that severely impacts their wellbeing and social relationships**

The addictive nature of online platforms can lead users to develop an addiction that severely impacts their wellbeing and social relationships. Internet addiction exhibits similar underlying neurophysiological processes to other addictions (e.g. substance addiction), and young age is a significant risk factor. The pre-frontal cortex of adolescents – the brain area responsible for self-control,



decision-making, impulse regulation and resisting temptations – is still under development. Social media can also affect the amygdala, the region of the brain that processes emotions and anxiety: long-term exposure to social media and constant notifications may lead to increased anxiety and even structural changes in the amygdala over time.

### Advertising and privacy

As online users, young people are – just like adults – exposed to algorithmically personalised advertising. **Targeted advertising** typically relies on a combination of three types of targeting:

contextual, behavioural, and segment-based. Whereas contextual targeting adjusts ads solely to the content of a webpage (e.g. bicycle ads on a cycling website), behavioural and segment-based targeting rely on vast amounts of data gathered about users. Segment targeting uses information users have actively disclosed (e.g. when creating a profile), while behavioural targeting uses data inferred from users' online activity. Online users are often unaware of the extent of data collected about them. Based on the data collected, companies use algorithms to create specific data profiles, which are then sold to advertisers as target audiences. Personalised advertising can also reinforce structural discrimination – for example, targeting women and girls with advertisements (e.g. for cleaning products) that perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Young people are also specifically targeted through covert advertising by **influencers**, whose followers are seen as the ideal demographic for certain brands. Often, adolescents are unaware of the commercial motives behind product placements. By “following” brands on social media platforms, young people opt in to greater exposure to advertisements.

A tactic known as “**dark patterns**” tricks users to act involuntarily, and children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these tricks. While children obviously have less awareness of how recommendation systems and algorithms work, young

people might **be well aware** of these and even literally attempt to train them to meet their needs.

Online gambling has also become much more accessible in the last decade, making it appealing for young individuals who can easily evade age restrictions on online platforms. The **World Health Organization** (WHO) notes that, as it is available online, it is accessible almost anywhere, at any time, and problematic gambling can lead to serious harm. Heavy promotion of gambling online and through sport also poses risks of normalising gambling for children and young people. Teenagers, with reduced impulse control and increased novelty-seeking behaviour are at **significant risk** of excessive gambling or developing an addiction to gaming or gambling.

Young people are also at risk of losing their money to **“finfluencers”** who target youngsters on social media from their luxury yachts to offer them fantastic high-return investment opportunities.

### 3. Mental health, age limits and cultural bubbles

#### Mental health

In the past year, **discussion** has intensified regarding the possible impacts of social media and digital technologies on the mental and physical health of children and adolescents, and whether access to social media under a certain age should be banned. Most studies have

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so far focused on correlations between digital technology use and mental health, rather than causation. As such, it is not possible to say that problematic social media use is a cause of poor mental health outcomes; turning to social media may also be a way of coping with mental health problems. In its May 2025 **report**, the OECD notes that evidence linking digital technology use directly to mental health problems is mounting but remains preliminary. Problematic digital media use and poor wellbeing seem to be mutually reinforcing, further exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities. Adolescents often use social media to escape from negative feelings; it is therefore important to identify the difficulties they face in their life and find which protective factors could prevent issues from escalating and help to develop effective coping strategies.

**Boys seem to be more prone to gaming disorders while girls are more vulnerable to problematic social media and mobile phone use**

Emotional, particularly anxiety, disorders (such as panic or excessive worrying) and depression are common among adolescents. According to the WHO, **1 in 7** young people aged between 10 and 19 experiences mental disorder globally. The OECD's 2024 **report** notes that negative behaviours in digital environments – such as cyberbullying and problematic social media use – are on the rise and disproportionately affect girls. Problematic social media use, in turn, is consistently associated with attention deficit, sleep problems and feelings of exclusion in young people. Boys seem to be **more prone** to gaming disorders while girls are more vulnerable to problematic social media and mobile phone use.



A 2025 interdisciplinary **study** on the impact of digital technology on teenagers' wellbeing cautions against simplistic narratives: digital technology does not affect all adolescents in the same way, whether positively or negatively. While social media use had small negative effects on psychological wellbeing, gaming and entertainment apps (videos and games) did not. The study concludes: "Rather than debating whether digital technologies are 'good' or 'bad', and providing general bans, policies and interventions should focus on supporting adolescents in developing healthy, constructive ways to engage with them". Recent research also **suggests** that demographic characteristics, such as

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gender and age, seem to be determining factors when studying the implications of social media use. Researchers also criticise approaches allocating primary responsibility for healthy use of social media to individual users and families, calling for greater attention to be paid to platforms' active strategies to maximise engagement.

The 2025 **JRC policy brief** also notes that female adolescents exhibit higher intensive (over three hours per day) social media usage rates than their male peers (42 % vs 32 %), and are significantly more likely to experience symptoms of depression (60 % vs 35 %) and anxiety (65 % vs 41 %), highlighting the need for gender-specific policy interventions and research. It concludes: "Recent research suggests that an approach strictly based on the amount of use time may oversimplify the complex interactions between social media use and adolescent wellbeing. Rather than screen time alone, factors such as the nature of online activities, the quality of interactions, individual differences in vulnerability and resilience play a crucial role in shaping the effects of social media use." Moreover, gender-specific policies are critical to addressing higher social media use and disproportionately high mental-health challenges that female adolescents face. Awareness-raising campaigns and digital literacy education should focus on promoting healthy social media use, such as self-regulation of time. Parents and teachers also need training on the risks of social media and, last but not least, young

people themselves have to be included in the dialogue on the measures that could be taken to protect their mental health.

## Age limits

Despite many platforms setting a minimum age limit for users, with 13 years the most common, use among younger children remains widespread, as verifying a user's real age remains difficult. A **2022 study** found that around one-third of children aged between 8 and 17 have an adult (18+) user profile on at least one social media platform in the UK, and a government-commissioned **study** in Denmark recently found that 94 % of Danish children have social media accounts before they turn 13.

Some platforms have introduced specific “teen accounts” with built-in protections for teenagers under 16: **Meta** has introduced these for Instagram in all countries. TikTok has a teen account for users aged between 13 and 17, with a 60-minute default daily screen time limit, and other platforms also have some **safety features** for under-18s. However, it is not uncommon for teenagers to lie about their age when creating accounts.

In September 2025, Euroconsumer published a **survey** finding that most respondents admitted starting to use online platforms before the minimum age of 13.<sup>4</sup> Of the respondents, 80 % were

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<sup>4</sup> Some 68 % admitted having a WhatsApp account; 66 % a YouTube account, and just under half (47 % and 45 % respectively) an Instagram or TikTok account at the age of 12. The survey covered teenagers aged between 12 and 17 in Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Poland.



**Some EU Member States are considering laws banning social media use for children under 15 or 16 years old, and calling for a pan-European digital age of majority**

active on at least four different platforms.<sup>5</sup> Half had already tried to reduce their screen time, illustrating a growing interest in healthy digital habits. Some 63 % felt capable of managing the time they spend online; however, the same percentage also thought tools such as screen-time trackers could be useful.

Some EU Member States, including France, Greece, and Spain, are **considering** laws banning social media use for children under 15 or 16 years old, and calling for a pan-European digital age of majority. Sweden and Denmark have also expressed their **support for quick action** to protect young peoples' mental health. Outside

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<sup>5</sup> The most popular were WhatsApp (93 %) and YouTube (92 %), followed by Instagram (82 %), TikTok (69 %), Facebook (60 %) and Snapchat (42 %).

Europe, the Australian Government passed a new law, effective from December 2025, introducing a **minimum age of 16** for accounts on certain social media platforms. According to the Australian Government, social media risks, such as cyberbullying, harmful content and online predators, outweigh the positives. Since 2023, some states in the United States have **passed legislation** requiring a minimum age or limiting the time children can spend on social media.

At the EU digital ministers meeting in Denmark on 10 October 2025, most EU countries signed a ministerial declaration, the “**Jutland declaration**”, on how to protect minors online. The declaration supports a possible digital majority age to access social media, but also calls for young people themselves to participate in the design and evaluation of digital protection measures.

In its May 2025 **report**, the OECD questions the effectiveness of social media bans for young people, stressing instead the need for clear guidance and support to assist educators, parents, and caregivers in helping children positively manage their engagement with digital technologies, without being excluded from key areas of the digital environment, such as social media.

## Cultural bubbles

A rift is increasingly **observed** in the attitudes of young women and young men: as young women think more liberally, young men are shifting to



more conservative, right-wing ideas. In countries on every continent, an ideological gap has widened between young men and women. Algorithmically personalised content offered to them on the internet and social media, including news items and headlines, could lead (young) women and men to increasingly live in separate cultural bubbles.

On the other hand, social media is also a fast and powerful tool for uniting people behind common causes, as in the case of climate action, or for triggering **online campaigns**. Recent **political upheavals** instigated by "Generation Z" (born between around 1997 and 2012) were **mainly organised** through social media and gaming chat platforms.

For news and current affairs content, AI assistants are starting to replace search engines as information gateways for many users, especially for young people. However, a **study** published by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the BBC in October 2025 found that AI routinely misrepresents news content, regardless of language, territory, or AI platform. The study found that 45 % of all AI answers had at least one significant issue, and 20 % contained major accuracy issues, including hallucinated details and outdated information.

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## **4. Looking ahead**

At the European level, the **Better Internet for Kids' Youth Programme** provides a platform for young people to share their

views on making the internet safer. A youth policy dialogue was organised on **cyberbullying** in September 2025, ahead of the European Commission's expected proposal on an EU action plan. The network of **Safer Internet Centres** across Europe offers support, practical help and guidance for young people and parents.

The Commission published its **guidelines on the protection of minors** under the **Digital Services Act** (DSA) in July 2025, aiming to ensure a safe online experience for children and young people. The guidelines set out a list of measures to protect children from online risks such as grooming, harmful content, and problematic and addictive behaviours, as well as cyberbullying and harmful commercial practices. However, following these guidelines is voluntary for the platforms.

In her **State of the Union speech** in September 2025, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stressed that “algorithms preying on children's vulnerabilities with the explicit purpose of creating addictions” should not raise Europe's children. She announced that she would commission a panel of experts to advise her by the end of 2025 on Europe's best approach to social media. The related “**letter of intent**” mentions an **action plan** against cyberbullying, and a **digital fairness act**, which could further address topics such as addictive design, dark patterns, and in-app purchases, both expected by the end of 2026, as key priorities. For monitoring and



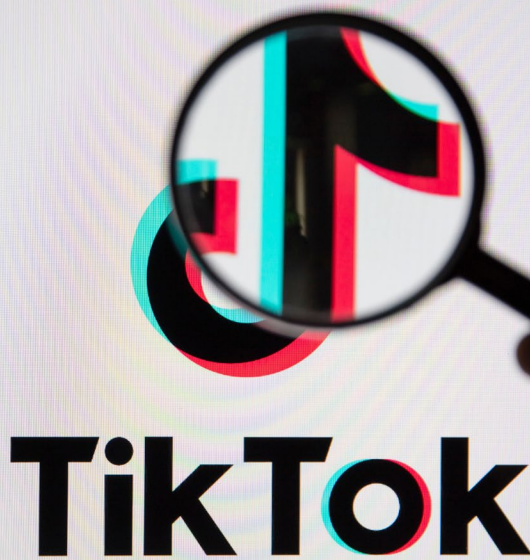
detecting information manipulation and disinformation, a new European Centre for Democratic Resilience is expected, to gather expertise across Member States and neighbouring countries.

In the context of the evaluation and review of the **Audiovisual Media Services Directive** (AVMSD), expected by the end of 2026, reflections continue on whether modifications to the existing rules are needed, for example concerning the rules applicable to influencers. In May 2025, the Council already adopted **conclusions** setting out the Council's preliminary position ahead of the forthcoming review.

During its plenary session in November 2025, the European Parliament adopted an own-initiative report on **protection of minors online**, recommending measures to address the problem of children bypassing age-verification, as well as warning of the risk of addiction, mental health problems and exposure to illegal content. In the report, Members propose an EU-wide digital minimum age of 16 for access to social media, video-sharing platforms and AI companions, unless authorised by parents.

Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) is currently drafting a report on the **impact of social media and the online environment on young people**. A legislative procedure is **ongoing** (since 2022), aimed at adopting a regulation **combating child sexual abuse online**.

On 10 October 2025, the Commission **announced** that it has initiated the first investigative actions scrutinising



# TikTok

safeguards for minors on Snapchat, YouTube, Apple App Store and Google Play under the DSA. The Commission is requesting information on their age verification systems, as well as on how they prevent minors from accessing illegal products such as drugs or vapes; content promoting eating disorders; gambling apps, and the so-called “nudify apps”. On 24 October 2025, the Commission published its **preliminary findings** indicating that Facebook, Instagram and TikTok may be in breach of their transparency obligations under the DSA.

The Commission is currently working on an EU-wide **age-verification app** to protect minors online, a blueprint of which is being tested in a number of Member States since July 2025.

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In the **conclusions** of the European Council held on 23 October 2025, the Council stresses “the importance of protecting minors, including through a digital age of majority for accessing social media, respecting national competences”.

In its 2025 **strategic foresight report**, the Commission notes that “social media is deepening ideological echo chambers and driving polarisation, with algorithms prioritising divisive content”. The report also notes the political and ideological gap emerging between young women and men. Furthermore, it notes that “the effects of a new global oligarchy” are emerging, with a few tech billionaires increasingly influencing politics, and that “manipulation campaigns using deepfakes or AI-generated fake news are already capable of weakening governments, reducing trust, destabilising markets, or influencing elections”. Action is needed to foster AI literacy and counter polarisation, information manipulation and disinformation amplified by social media and AI algorithms. This could include supporting trusted and independent information ecosystems that could help create shared deliberation spaces, transcending information bubbles. ■

### Further reading

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Park, Kristy, Ging, Debbi, Murphy, Shane, & McGrath, Cian. (2023). *The impact of the use of social media on women and girls*. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament.

