European Parliament

Research for CULT Committee –
The influence of social media on the development of children and young people

This study examines the influence of social media on the development of children and young people. The study includes a literature review of research on European children's use of social media and a legal and policy analysis of the EU framework to address the negative effects on children's well-being.

Key findings

Social media are pervasive in the lives of European children and young people through which they encounter a diverse range of content, contact, conduct and contract risks. Solutions to the challenges that social media pose for children's development are not easily addressed given the complex way in which risks and opportunities are intertwined. In this study, the focus is on problematic use and the potential harm social media may have for children's development. However, the many benefits children gain from being connected through social media also need to be acknowledged.

Children are routinely exposed to harmful online content on social media platforms such as cyberhate, sexualised content, gory or violent images, content that promotes eating disorders, and disinformation. Harmful effects for children's development include potential increased aggression, problematic sexual behaviours, unhealthy eating habits, body image dissatisfaction and distorted values and attitudes. Some studies have also pointed to regular youth exposure to extremist content on social media though more research is needed on its effects. Media literacy and supportive family or peer environments have been found to be moderating influences.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on "The influence of social media on the development of children and young people". The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: https://bit.ly/3XkgYd8

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Harmful online contacts with adults can give rise to risks of sexual exploitation, harassment and threats of extortion. Children generally report confidence in managing the risks of meeting new people online which is an everyday experience for many young people. However, studies highlight gaps in children's awareness of the risks and their coping strategies with unfamiliar situations. In addition, vulnerable children may be more at risk.

Conduct risks on social media platforms arise from aggressive or bullying peer-to-peer behaviour and have been found to have serious adverse effects for younger users. Being a victim of cyberbullying is a persistent risk that children face and is commonplace. Some associations with problematic social media use and bullying others have been found. Social-emotional learning, mentoring, and education on online safety have all played positive roles in countering victimisation risks.

Sexual messaging and sharing of sexual images, known to be increasingly normalised among young people, also gives rise to risks and potential harms. Unwanted requests for sexual information are a cause of distress for young people while the non-consensual sharing of intimate images is a source of severe harm and trauma.

Participation in harmful online communities (promoting self-harm, suicide etc.) is also a potential source of harm though other contributory factors to poor mental health also need to be considered.

Children face wide-ranging *contract risks* through unfair practices, clickbait strategies and hidden marketing practices that contravene their rights and ignore their best interests. Algorithm-based recommendation systems constitute a significant factor in increasing risks to children, with research showing that children have little awareness of how such systems work.

Children's *mental health and well-being* is a vital area to consider concerning social media. This is a complex area which involves many different and interrelated risk manifestations. The evidence for either a positive or negative impact on children's health and well-being is mixed and inconclusive. Probing the outcomes of problematic social media use – reported by only a minority of children – is an important priority for research.

Responses and solutions

Supporting children to be safe, protected and empowered when they go online is a cornerstone of EU digital policies, expressed most clearly in the Better Internet for Kids (BIK+) strategy adopted by the Commission in May 2022.

Significant legal and regulatory developments governing social media and online marketplaces include the Digital Services Act, the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive, and the General Data Protection Regulation. The Unfair Commercial Practices Directive is also relevant to such areas as social media marketing and the activities of influencers. Legislative proposals under consideration including the Artificial Intelligence Act and the Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse also propose solutions with far-reaching consequences for children's online safety.

Internationally, a noteworthy trend in legislative and policy development has been to put an emphasis on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, reinforced by enhanced protection of children's privacy and digital service provider obligations towards safety by design and age appropriate design.

Alongside legal and policy frameworks, support for children's online well-being is recognised as a multistakeholder activity reflected in the many different programmes and initiatives carried out nationally and at the EU level to raise awareness, lessen the chance of children encountering risks and support children if they become victims of online harm.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Recommendation 1: Safety by design is an important concept that should be endorsed and promoted within regulatory discourse.** As the research illustrates, social media is pervasive in the lives of children and young people. In that context, social media environments should be designed to be safe from the outset. Appropriate standards for safety by design can ensure that safety is neither a retrofit nor an afterthought but instead is "baked-in" from the start.

- **Recommendation 2: Age-appropriate design has the potential to mainstream the safe, empowered and rights-respecting participation of young people and should be similarly promoted within the policy sphere.** As referenced in the study, the Commission's support for the development of an EU Code of conduct on age appropriate design is essential to develop this approach further. To ensure its widescale adoption, further work is needed to operationalise the relevant practical processes and monitoring mechanisms associated with such a code.

- **Recommendation 3: Continued development of privacy protections for children's data in the social environment is essential.** One of the distinctive areas of risk that children encounter relates to the data given off in the course of their social media use. Research shows that children often lack awareness of and the skills to manage these highly complex data ecosystems. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) advances the position that children merit a higher bar of protection due to their evolving capacities. Yet, further development of processes, guidance and standards are needed to ensure best practices in supporting children's privacy in social media environments.

- **Recommendation 4: Age assurance and digital identity systems require multistakeholder support if barriers to their implementation are to be overcome and systems to be effective.** Many of the challenges children encounter in using social media arise when they are not appropriately identified as children, thereby meriting higher levels of protection. The lack of adequate and privacy-preserving age assurance mechanisms, as required under GDPR, contributes to this problem. Therefore, all relevant obstacles to developing and rolling out robust age assurance systems should be addressed.

- **Recommendation 5: To future-proof policies and to ensure that existing policies and initiatives are appropriate and effective, there is a need for a strong research observatory function at the European level.** The study called attention in several critical areas to the lack of or uneven evidence in some key areas regarding children's digital activities. The lack of sufficient comparative research at the EU level and longitudinal studies on children's development against the background of digitalisation stand out. Technologies can also quickly outpace policy and regulatory approaches creating new vulnerabilities for children. A greater volume of research on this topic is essential to keep pace with a rapidly evolving digital sphere.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: https://bit.ly/3XkgYd8

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