

SAFER INTERNET FORUM 2024

Thursday, 21 November 2024

Hybrid event | Brussels, Belgium and online

Where's the harm?

Protecting children and young people against
inappropriate content and bullying online



Report on the proceedings of Safer Internet Forum 2024

(including annexes on the preparatory work of the SIF Youth Advisory
Group and BIK Youth Panel)

Further information, including the Forum booklet with full agenda
and contributor biographies, and session recordings from the event,
can be found at better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/sif.



European
Commission

Better Internet for Kids



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Safer Internet Forum 2024 was organised in a youth-led manner. We take this opportunity to thank the members of the SIF Youth Advisory Group, BIK Youth Panel and International Youth Panel for their dedication and commitment to helping to create a safer and better internet for their peers, and young people across the globe.

We also take this opportunity to thank all speakers, panellists and video contributors for their input to the Forum, and all participants who contributed so fully to the discussions of the day both onsite and online.

In case of queries, please contact the Safer Internet Forum Secretariat at saferinternetforum@betterinternetforkids.eu.

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Executive summary

The Safer Internet Forum (SIF) 2024, held on 21 November in Brussels and online, brought together over 200 in-person attendees and more than 450 online participants from over 50 countries, featuring a diverse group of stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, law enforcement, youth representatives, parents, educators, and industry experts. As always, SIF 2024 aimed to foster collaboration among stakeholders to share best practices, knowledge, and resources, ultimately seeking to enhance the safety and well-being of children and young people online.

This year's theme, "**Where's the harm? Protecting children and young people against inappropriate content and bullying online**" addressed increasing global concerns regarding online safety for young people, particularly considering growing issues around cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content online. Organised in a youth-led format, the Forum was shaped by young voices through the active participation of members of the Safer Internet Forum Youth Advisory Group, the BIK Youth Panel, and an International Youth Panel, who chaired and presented throughout.

The rapid pace of technological progress in recent years has made it increasingly difficult for governments, policymakers, and educators to keep up with developments and trends, especially in areas like legislation, governance, and digital education. Accordingly, the lines between offline and online life have become increasingly blurred, affecting young people (and indeed all age groups). There is an urgent need to balance protection and empowerment for youth in the digital space, with particular attention to the implementation of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) and the Digital Services Act (DSA). While compliance, such as that promoted by the DSA, is extremely important, it is just one component of creating a safer and better online world; creating an ecosystem where education, digital literacy and critical thinking skills are fostered is key. Children and young people need to be empowered to thrive in the digital era and,

at the same time, have the skills and confidence to challenge negative influences while maintaining accountability for their actions and the information shared online.

As the day proceeded, participants engaged in various workshops and deep-dive sessions that explored various aspects of online harms, including misinformation, body image issues, pornography, cyberbullying, hate speech, and the psychological impacts of these experiences, hearing young people's experiences, concerns, and future wishes for addressing such issues directly.

Alongside consideration of the potential harms, presentations touched on regulatory measures being considered in various countries to mitigate risks associated with excessive screen time and social media usage among minors.

The Forum concluded with a keynote presentation and panel discussion, considering how best to support children's and young people's mental health and well-being online and act against cyberbullying.

Several key themes and takeaways emerged throughout the day's discussions:

- Young users are more susceptible to the influences of social media, leading to engagement by design tactics that are increasingly used to keep them hooked. Significantly, simple solutions like timers are ineffective and are not successful in reducing screen time. Features such as "focus mode", break times, and turning off notifications can potentially help, but all such solutions have their limitations.
- Generative AI is becoming increasingly problematic. Understanding how AI works can lead to more informed choices, hence the development of AI literacy – from an early age – is essential.
- Safety by design approaches can be useful in mitigating risks and harms online for children and young people, coupled with other tools and measures (such as age assurance). Children and young people should be involved in service design and development.

- Schools are stepping up efforts to address mental health, well-being and cyberbullying, but this is often done in a reactive rather than proactive method. These should be assigned equal priority alongside academic needs.
- Research continues to play an important role in understanding the dynamics at play relating to children and young people's technology use and its impact on well-being. Continued evidence-gathering is key.
- Active youth participation is essential in decision-making processes.
- Reporting fatigue is a significant issue when harmful content is encountered; young people often feel discouraged from reporting, regarding processes as cumbersome with limited effectiveness. It is important to create an ecosystem of trust and transparency; new trusted flagger initiatives will support this.

In conclusion, safeguarding young people online requires collaboration between stakeholders, informed regulation, and proactive education efforts, many of which are discussed further throughout this Forum report.

Overview

The **Safer Internet Forum (SIF)** is a key annual international conference in Europe where policymakers, researchers, law enforcement bodies, youth, parents and caregivers, teachers, NGOs, industry representatives, experts and other relevant actors come together to discuss the latest trends, opportunities, risks and solutions related to child online safety and making the internet a better place. This year's edition took place in a hybrid format in Brussels, Belgium and online on **21 November 2024** with a theme of ***Where's the harm? Protecting children and young people against inappropriate content and bullying online.***

The event was organised in a **youth-led** manner, with young people playing an active role in planning, preparing and delivering the Forum through the Safer Internet Forum Youth Advisory Group (SIF YAG), the BIK Youth Panel, and – new for 2024 – an International Youth Panel. A total of **48 young people from 28 European and non-EU countries** gathered in Brussels online to ensure their voices were heard.

More than **200 participants** joined the event in person with more than **450** people participating **online**, jointly representing more than **50 countries** across the world.

The event aimed to help participants:

- stay updated on trends and issues related to children's right to be protected, empowered and respected in the digital environment;
- understand online harms and how to prevent them;
- share knowledge, experience, and best practices;
- find collaboration opportunities for new ideas, resources and projects.

Support the implementation of the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) and related policy work.

More specifically as regards this year's theme, the past 12 months have seen heightened concern globally around the potential dangers and risks to children and young people online, including cyberbullying, which remains the most common reason for contacting Insafe helplines. Campaigns to ban the use of social media and smartphones for younger teens have gained traction, and more legislation and regulations are being enacted.

An [expert panel in France](#) recently addressed concerns about excessive screen time's impact on youth. They **released a set of recommendations**, including barring smartphones for young children and limiting social media use to those 15 and older.

[In Italy, new guidelines have been issued banning the use of smartphones and tablets](#) in classrooms in kindergartens, primary schools, and lower secondary schools, extending an existing ban on non-academic use of these devices.

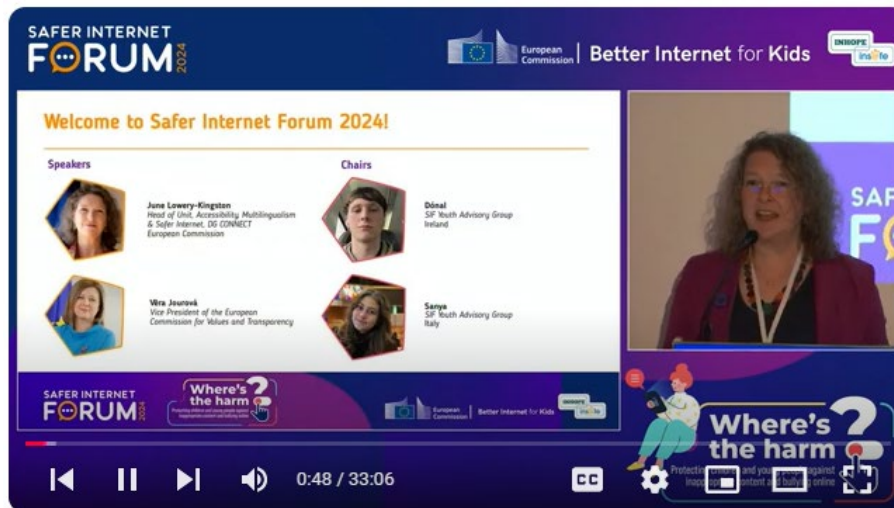
Against this background, Safer Internet Forum 2024 placed a particular focus on pillar one of the BIK+ strategy: safe digital experiences and, more specifically, how to protect children and young people against inappropriate content and bullying online. The Forum took stock of the new DSA rules and their implementation, discussing the risks of exposure to potentially harmful online content and behaviour, including cyberbullying, and explored the tools and strategies currently available or needed to mitigate these risks.

Please read on to discover more about the event. Further information, including **session recordings**, can be found at better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/sif.

Safer Internet Forum (SIF) 2024 was organised by European Schoolnet (EUN) on behalf of the European Commission (EC) in the framework of the EC's Better Internet for Kids (BIK) initiative, with funding provided by the Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL). In case of queries, please contact the Safer Internet Forum Secretariat at saferinternetforum@betterinternetforkids.eu.

Opening and welcome

A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



Kicking off the proceedings, **June Lowery-Kingston** (Head of Unit “Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet”, DG CONNECT, European Commission) welcomed onsite and online participants and presented the Digital Services Act (DSA) booklet that is now available in 24 European languages. The booklet provides an overview of the legislation and its implications for young people in 24 European languages. [It is available to download here.](#)

Following June’s words of welcome and wishes to everyone for an inspiring day with the excellent speakers and engaged youth, **Karl Hopwood** (European Schoolnet (EUN)) welcomed all participants and continued with some brief housekeeping notes and instructions for participants onsite and online. He then welcomed to the stage **Věra Jourová** (Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency).

Věra Jourová welcomed onsite and online participants. She highlighted that, while the DSA is a first and much-needed step to make the internet safer and better for children and young people, it is only possible to make a change for the better when everyone works together. The collaboration between all actors, such as children and young people, parents, teachers, policymakers, and industry actors, is critical to

better protecting minors online. Children and young people find themselves in high uncertainty, and it is understandable that they would choose their screens to distract themselves. It is the EU's priority to convey that life away from the screen is worth living, exploring and enjoying, while also benefiting from the opportunities that digital environments can provide.

After Věra Jourová's address, **SIF Youth Advisory Group (SIF YAG) members Dónal (Ireland) and Sanya (Italy)** took to the stage and thanked June and Vera for their warm words of welcome. They then continued to give a brief overview of the agenda and the topics that would be addressed throughout the day. They closed their welcome address by introducing the first keynote speaker, Professor Debbie Ging (Dublin City University).

A graphic illustrator was present throughout the Forum recording the content of the various sessions; these are provided throughout this report.



Keynote session: Young people's exposure to harmful content and behaviour online

A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



Professor Debbie Ging began by introducing the topic – *Young people's exposure to harmful content and behaviour online, and what we can do about it*. She highlighted that the studies she has been involved in over the past few years have focused on harmful content, specifically the impact of gender-based and sexual abuse, as well as online hate speech.

She continued by emphasising the rapid pace of technological progress, which has made it increasingly difficult for governments, policymakers, and educators to keep up, especially in areas like legislation, governance, and digital education. Professor Ging described the rise of new phenomena, such as catfishing and the promotion of eating disorders, as alarming. Academic research struggles to keep up with these emerging phenomena, leaving little time to develop a broader understanding.

As such, instead of reacting to immediate issues, it's crucial to focus on understanding the deeper context—who is creating these problems?, what conditions are fuelling them?, and how can they be prevented? In the rush to

address social problems, the underlying social questions often go overlooked, and it benefits both governments and social media companies to keep people from reflecting deeply on these matters.

Professor Ging raised the question of whether the internet has caused, facilitated, or amplified societal issues, or if it merely exposes pre-existing problems. She also highlighted the blurred lines between online and offline life, arguing that digital and human experiences are now inseparable, affecting all age groups, not just young people. She suggested reframing discussions around young people's exposure to harmful content in the context of digital capitalism, which shapes wealth distribution and societal rules. Instead of focusing solely on visible symptoms, she emphasised the importance of addressing root causes tied to societal structures and political contexts. The goal, she concluded, is to explore both immediate solutions and more radical, long-term approaches.

The keynote continued by exploring the "4Cs": Content, Contact, Conduct, and Commerce, and how these factors in isolation fail to drive significant change. She highlighted the role of commerce, and especially harmful advertising that promotes unhealthy body standards and gender stereotypes, and exposes users to online gambling and financial scams. The algorithms behind social media platforms drive these harms, as seen during the rise of TikTok's influencer culture during COVID-19. She pointed to the emergence of the "stoic industrial complex", which frames masculinity in terms of the dominance of men and rejection of therapy or medication.

Her [research](#), conducted with colleagues at Dublin City University, examined algorithm-driven content recommendations on TikTok and YouTube. Using fake accounts mimicking young male users, the study found that a significant proportion of recommended content was toxic, including male supremacist, antifeminist, far-right, and conspiracy material. The study also noted that TikTok fed similar content, while YouTube algorithms showed greater reactivity and leaned more heavily into far-right and conspiracy themes. Over time, the quantity of toxic content increased significantly. These findings align with other studies, including [Australian research](#)

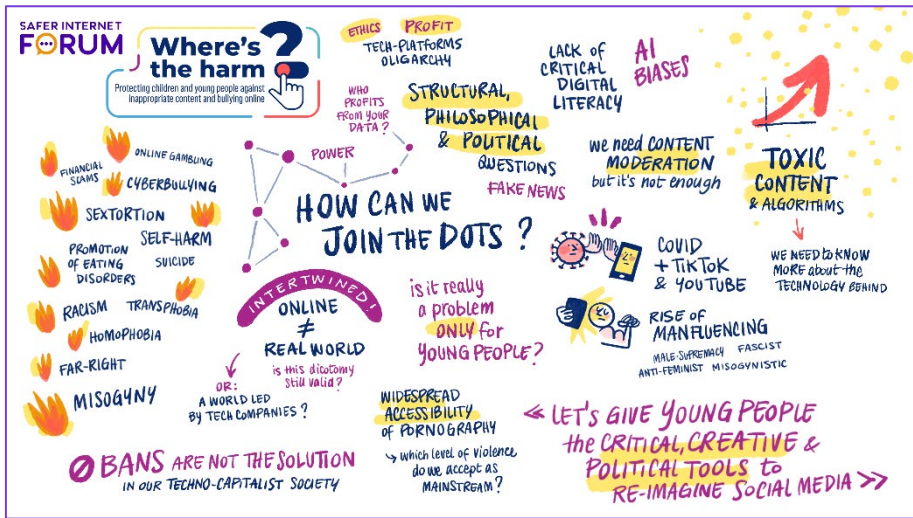
from 2022, which found less extreme but similar trends, especially concerning anti-feminist content pre-TikTok.

Professor Ging continued by exploring the profound challenges posed by digital platforms in shaping the online experiences of young people. Highlighting findings from University College London (UCL), the University of Kent, and Amnesty International, she emphasised the alarming amplification of harmful content by algorithms. Studies reveal a fourfold rise in misogynistic materials, with user simulation models uncovering the troubling role of recommendation systems. On TikTok, mental health content searches often lead to self-harm and suicidal ideation materials being pushed to users, with investigations finding children as young as eight exposed to this content.

Reports on pornography depict an equally troubling picture, with degrading and violent materials becoming mainstream. Young people's first exposure to sexual content often occurs online, leading to harmful impacts on self-esteem, relationships, and perceptions of gender. Boys and men, too, report feelings of shame and disconnection, fuelling debates about the normalisation of such content.

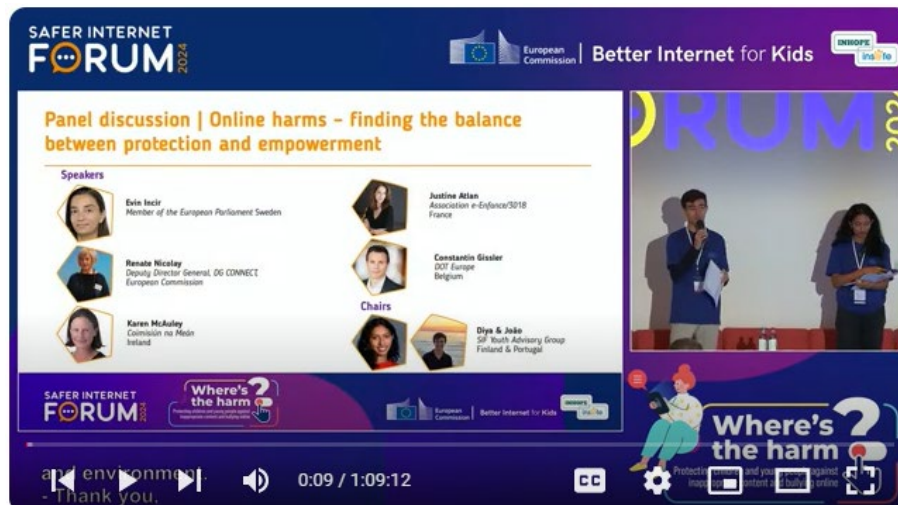
Professor Ging outlined the importance of critical digital literacy. This involves empowering young people not only to navigate digital spaces but also to question the algorithms, business models, and power structures behind these platforms. Education systems should equip youth with tools to critically engage with digital media, understand the economics of social media, and become creators and policymakers who can reshape digital ecosystems.

While educational reforms are slow and underfunded, they remain essential for fostering long-term change. The shift from a protectionist mindset to one of empowerment is crucial, encouraging young people to transition from passive consumers to active digital citizens. She concluded that by integrating safety-by-design principles and fostering a deeper understanding of the digital world, society can begin addressing the structural inequalities perpetuated by techno-capitalism. However, this vision requires a commitment to reimagining social media as a space for empowerment and collaboration rather than exploitation and harm.



Panel discussion: Online harms – finding the balance between protection and empowerment

A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



The first plenary panel discussion of the day was introduced by **members of the SIF Youth Advisory Group, Diya (Finland) and João (Portugal)**. They welcomed attendees and introduced the panellists:

- Evin Incir, Member of the European Parliament, Sweden
- Renate Nikolay, Deputy Director General, DG CONNECT, European Commission
- Karen McAuley, Coimisiún na Meán, Ireland
- Justine Atlan, Association e-Enfance/3018, France
- Constantin Gissler, DOT Europe, Belgium

Evin Incir, Member of the European Parliament, began by acknowledging the similarities in voting patterns between the US and Sweden, noting that young men often lean towards right-wing politics while young women tend to support liberal or

left-wing ideologies. She added that gender equality is not solely about women's rights but must also consider the needs and perspectives of boys and young men.

She highlighted the importance of working with both boys and girls to create a safer online environment. Children and young people are targeted by violence, but their experiences are often overlooked. Discussing this topic at events like this is crucial, as it helps apply the necessary pressure on legislators. She also discussed the transition from temporary to long-term legislation on preventing and combating online child sexual abuse, noting that in Sweden, campaigns were reframed from child protection to "chat control". Evin criticised this narrative and stressed the importance of ensuring that the younger generation can grow up free from these crimes as more of their lives move online. Evin concluded by noting that challenges that are present offline also appear online and that legislators must keep pace with these issues rather than falling years behind.

Panellists were then asked to share their vision of the internet as they imagine it in their dreams.

Renate Nikolay described her vision of a perfect internet as a safe space for honest discourse, trust, and the exchange of opinions, free from illegal content and harmful speech. She expressed optimism about the tools available to begin creating such an environment but acknowledged that achieving this "ideal digital space" would require societal change. This includes fostering critical thinking skills and empowering individuals to thrive in the digital era while maintaining accountability for the information shared online.

Karen McAuley, from Coimisiún na Meán explained the mission of the organisation. Established in 2023, Coimisiún na Meán aims to regulate the media landscape across broadcasting, video-on-demand, and the online digital environment. The organisation is actively working on strategies and visions for creating a trusted digital environment, engaging in public consultations to ensure inclusivity and diversity in its approach. A key focus area is safeguarding children's rights, well-being, and development within the digital space, as well as in broadcast media. Karen expressed enthusiasm for participating in her first Safer Internet

Forum. She highlighted the importance of listening to youth perspectives on what the perfect internet might look like for them.

Diya, member of the SIF Youth Advisory Group, pointed out the significant role the internet has played in enabling online education and telehealth, especially during the pandemic, when it allowed students to continue their studies remotely and facilitated communication between patients and doctors. She also noted the particular benefits for underprivileged communities and suggested that further development in these areas would be a valuable improvement. Diya expressed the belief that young people would greatly appreciate these advancements, given how central the internet is to their lives.

João, member of the SIF Youth Advisory Group, emphasised the need for the internet to be a safe space for all users, with high levels of security and mutual respect. He expressed the belief that achieving a “perfect internet” requires creating an online environment where individuals feel safe from threats and attacks, with everyone contributing to making platforms safer. He also highlighted the importance of comfort and emotional safety online, pointing out that harmful content can deeply traumatise users. He suggested that the internet should allow users to avoid such content and only engage with material that aligns with their preferences. This, he argued, would move us closer to an ideal internet.

João also mentioned respect, both online and offline, as a core value. He emphasised that simple acts of kindness, such as saying “hello” and “thank you”, can make a significant difference in improving the online environment. João further acknowledged that while the dream of a perfect internet may seem utopian, it is something worth striving for. He called for active efforts to turn this vision into reality, with individuals serving as agents of change.

Justine Atlan also shared her vision of an ideal internet as one that can recognise minors, children, and teenagers in the same way the offline world does. Currently, this is not the case, which contributes to the increased exposure of young people to online risks. As a result, children and teenagers are not fully able to access the opportunities the internet offers or exercise the rights that are recognised in the

offline world, such as the right to express themselves and access information. She emphasised that making the online world more responsive to the needs of young people should be a top priority. While acknowledging that this vision may seem like a dream, she expressed hope that it will soon become a reality.

Constantin Gissler highlighted that at DOT Europe, they frequently discuss topics related to the balance between protection, empowerment, openness, and control in the online world. For him, the ideal internet is one where these elements coexist in harmony, providing users with a safe environment while allowing them to connect, share, and create. Achieving this balance is crucial, as the internet is not a static entity but constantly evolving in response to societal expectations. He also supported João's point about the importance of kindness in online interactions, emphasising that while much of the focus is on technology, how people use it—guided by respect and kindness—is equally significant.

Renate was asked about the actions that the European Commission has taken so far, and what can be expected in the future regarding harmful content. She drew attention to the DSA and especially the regulations for large online platforms. She emphasised the need for continuous monitoring to ensure platforms are adhering to the rules. Upon enforcing the new regulations, the European Commission has prioritised the protection of young people online, initiating investigations into platforms like TikTok and Instagram, particularly in relation to addictive designs and inappropriate content. Ongoing dialogues with these platforms could lead to significant actions, with investigations already underway on issues such as addictive design. Renate also noted the introduction of the TikTok Lite Rewards Programme in Spain and France and its subsequent withdrawal from the EU as an example of measures. While there were some setbacks in rolling out these initiatives, the European Commission views this as a success. The Commission is committed to increasing transparency, particularly through annual systemic risk assessments and the publication of transparency reports. Renate highlighted the importance of collaboration with national coordinators and the creation of guidelines within the DSA to ensure both large and small platforms adhere to the high safety measures required for young people.

She also underscored the need for a holistic approach to digital safety, which includes not only protective measures but also the promotion of digital literacy and digital citizenship. She emphasised the parallel work required to harmonise age verification online, including the upcoming EU Digital Wallet in 2026.

Karen was asked to outline what is happening in Ireland to protect children and young people online, and how her work complements what is being done by the European Commission. At the national level, Coimisiún na Meán has done extensive work over the last year and a half year to develop an [Online Safety Code](#). It applies to video-sharing platforms based in Ireland and puts in place rules on how platforms should address harmful content. Furthermore, Coimisiún na Meán is investing in media literacy and [recently launched a report about children's rights online](#), including the right to report content that they find disturbing. Karen also stressed the establishment of the Youth Advisory Committee for young people under the age of 25.

Justine was asked about e-Enfance's role as a trusted flagger in France. Additionally, she was asked about her work as the national point of contact for cyberbullying and how this system operates in France. Justine answered that e-Enfance has been working for the past 15 years to become the unique bullying point of contact in France. Justine also highlighted the French helpline (3018), which is open seven days in a week. Victims can receive support from psychologists, lawyers and digital experts. Furthermore, she pointed out that the e-Enfance team reports content or accounts which endanger the well-being of children and young people to all tech companies. She emphasised that, in 2024 alone, the helpline has received around 150,000 calls, whereas around 50,000 accounts have been reported. e-Enfance's role as a trusted flagger was crucial during the Commission's investigation of platforms like TikTok and X.

Constantin was asked about the challenges the tech companies face when trying to comply with the DSA and other regulations. He started by noting that both internet content and interactions pose quite a challenge; it's a moving target since the internet is not static and is evolving all the time. Constantin emphasised that

compliance has become much more complex. It is hard to have rules for all platforms, which might vary depending on the different content and features they provide, and in the problems they face. He further pointed out that compliance is only one component; education, media literacy and parental support are also key.

A question was then posed: *“One problem for us, as younger users, is that reporting online abuse is neither easy nor comfortable. How can the Commission help us in overcoming this key problem?”*

Renate stressed the importance of creating an eco-system of trust, where everybody plays their respective role. There should be a trust environment where everyone can report inappropriate content. She pointed out one of the most important aspects – transparency. The first step to achieve this is the upcoming first Risk Assessment Report. Renate emphasised that in the future, researchers will also have privileged access to data, going beyond the data that is publicly available.

Karen was asked what provisions are in place for content in terms of harmful content. She pointed out the [Guidelines on DSA Article 28](#), which aim is to assist platforms with meeting their obligations to ensure privacy, safety and security. At the national level in Ireland, the Online Safety Code focuses on a range of content: bullying, eating disorders, criminal, and adult-only content. In terms of provisions, Coimisiún na Meán included terms and conditions, which are designed to restrict harmful content on the video-sharing platforms that the code applies to. This includes age verification, parental controls, provisions in relation to complaints handling, and media literacy.

Justine was asked to explain why the app, which e-Enfance operates, is so effective and if this app work also be useful in other Member States. She emphasised that they built a very simply designed app, the aim of which is to be very effective but at the same time simple to use. The app allows users to call or message directly, without requiring a subscription.

Constantin was asked if he sees the platforms moving towards a safety-by-design approach. He answered that the privacy and the safety by design principles are important. The industry has already made a lot of investments over years. As an

example, he pointed out safety-by-design features and the privacy default settings for minors.

The final question was put to Renate, asking what the future priorities for the Commission are for ensuring the well-being of children online. Renate emphasised that the Commission's key priority is ensuring online safety for children, particularly by addressing the need for changes in business models. She highlighted the importance of evidence-gathering to understand the impact of social media on mental health, fostering further evidence-based discussions. A critical area of focus is the online advertisement model, looking beyond platform-specific issues to broader systemic challenges. Additionally, she stressed the importance of engaging internationally on these topics to drive meaningful progress.

Diya and João opened the floor for questions.

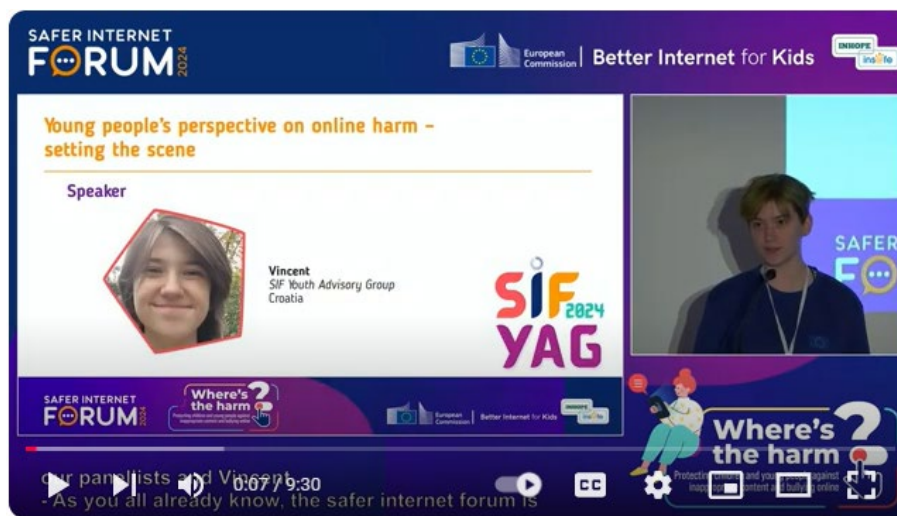
A participant raised a question about why some platforms resist implementing age assurance measures, despite the alternative potentially being a complete ban on children accessing the internet, as seen in Australia. Constantin explained that the resistance varies across platforms. Larger platforms often cite concerns about liability, while smaller services view age assurance as a significant cost factor. Additionally, there is no consensus on how age assurance should be implemented.

An online participant asked about developing a critical media strategy for schools, as a starting point for teachers. Professor Ging responded that approaches differ across countries, but she cautioned against scare tactics, such as warning students never to post nudes under the threat of dire consequences. Instead, she emphasised the importance of creating integrated modules that address a wide range of issues in digital media. She also highlighted the ready availability of packs, resources, and toolkits designed to support teachers in fostering critical digital media literacy.



Youth-led workshops: Young people's perspective on online harm

A recording of the scene setter for the youth-led workshops is available (click on the image to play the video):



Workshop 1: Misinformation

This session was hosted by BIK Youth Panellists Alba (Denmark), Elliot (The Netherlands), Iancu (The Netherlands) and International Youth Panellists Vardges (Armenia) and Julia (Brazil).

The workshop kicked off with a dynamic and informative presentation created by the young people themselves, offering a clear and comprehensive definition of misinformation and its key features. They elaborated on how misinformation, disinformation, and fake news differ, providing a deep dive into these concepts by drawing on various examples from different countries, with a special focus on Brazil.

The presentation highlighted how misinformation can spread through various media, including social media platforms, and discussed the societal and political impacts it can have. Among the many examples discussed, the young people chose

to delve deeper into two specific topics that have become increasingly relevant in today's digital age: AI-generated images and the spread of fake news.

For the first topic, the young people decided to engage the group through a hands-on activity designed to raise awareness about the growing role of artificial intelligence in creating misleading visuals. They organised a friendly competition between groups to identify which images were real and which ones had been generated by AI. Using an interactive platform, participants were presented with a series of images, some authentic and others artificially created. The aim was not only to challenge the groups but also to encourage critical thinking and improve the participants' ability to discern between real and manipulated content. This engaging exercise sparked lively discussions on the ethical implications of AI in media creation, as well as the ease with which AI can be used to deceive audiences, highlighting the growing need for media literacy in the digital era.

At the end of the interactive game, the participants provided input on how to identify AI-generated pictures:

- pay attention to the background, as it might be distorted and unrealistic;
- pay attention to details, as AI cannot realistically replicate details like hair or imperfections;
- AI pictures are typically symmetrical and "too perfect".

In the second part of the workshop, the participants engaged in a competition-style activity known as "Among Us". The participants were divided into groups, with each group consisting of five members. Each group was given a set of five newspaper headlines, one of which was fabricated, while the others were authentic. However, the participants were not made aware of which headline was false. The task required each participant to select one headline from the set and defend it as the legitimate one, thereby engaging in a process of reasoning and argumentation to justify their choice.

This activity encouraged critical thinking and debate, as participants had to present persuasive arguments to support their selected headline, all while remaining

unaware of which one was, in fact, fake. The exercise aimed to highlight the challenges of discerning credible news from misinformation and to demonstrate how easily individuals can be influenced by the information presented to them.

As key lessons learned, the young people emphasised the importance of questioning sources and critically analysing news content before accepting it as fact. Through this interactive competition, participants gained firsthand experience in the dynamics of misinformation and the complexities involved in distinguishing between real and fabricated news. It served as a fun yet thought-provoking way to engage participants in learning about the dangers of AI-generated misinformation and fake news, while also fostering collaboration and teamwork among the participants.

At the end of the session, a Q&A session was initiated by the participants to understand more about how misinformation affects young people's lives and how their schools are countering the problem.

Workshop 2: Body image, toxic masculinity/femininity, and mental health

The session started with a brief introduction from the youth about the topic, followed by short presentations from the youth speakers. This was followed by a screening of a self-produced video of the young people, which depicted the fake body image presentations on social media platforms and how this can negatively impact their mental health. The video showed different scenarios of social interactions among young people in different environments, such as at school or in support group discussions, discussing what they feel when they see the content online that creates unrealistic norms for ideal physical appearances.

The second part of the session invited the audience to take part in an interactive activity using Mentimeter, focused on various topics and issues.

When asked to contribute to a word cloud question on **eating disorders and body image issues**, the responses from the audience included:

- self-esteem issues;
- anorexia;
- insecurity;
- loneliness;
- sexualisation of women;
- bulimia;
- unrealistic beauty standards.

As regards the **main causes of eating disorders**, the discussion resulted in reasons such as:

- lack of diverse representation online;
- stress;
- peer pressure on social media;
- diet culture;
- not feeling in control of developments in life;
- misogyny;
- comparing oneself to others, and unrealistic body image standards.

During this activity, the audience also had to guess what percentage of adult women have withdrawn from activities due to their body image. While most responses were around 20 to 60 per cent, the real answer was revealed to be much higher at 70 per cent.

The next set of Mentimeter questions focused on **what toxic masculinity and femininity means**. For the former, the audience generally had a better understanding and mentioned terms such as patriarchy, machoism, misogyny, aggressiveness, stereotyping, peer pressure, and so on.

The youth presenters defined toxic masculinity as *“a collection of offensive, harmful beliefs, tendencies, and behaviours rooted in traditional male roles but taken to an*

extreme. It is often created by the social environment and, more specifically, within social media. This leads to domination, homophobia, and aggression and can be harmful to the mental health of all genders."

For potential solutions, the youth listed the following:

- Addressing the issue of disrespect in general.
- Encouraging men to express emotions freely.
- Encouraging compassion and kindness towards themselves and others.
- Listening to experiences and validating feelings.

The discussion on toxic femininity, however, showed that it is not as clear as its male counterpart. Some keywords provided by the audience included body image, competitive behaviour, female body stereotypes, and sexual objectification of the female body.

The youth presenters defined toxic femininity as the *"adherence to the gender binary in order to receive conditional value in patriarchal societies. It is a concept that restricts women from being cooperative, passive, sexually submissive, gentle, and deriving their value from physical beauty while being pleasing to men. If toxic masculinity encourages violence and domination in order to uphold an unequal power dynamic, then toxic femininity supports silent acceptance of violence and domination in order to survive."*

If comparing the two, toxic masculinity differentiates between systemic oppression of females on a high level (country, region) versus an individual level (i.e., Andrew Tate). However, both terms, regardless of prevalence in society, are important issues and require equal attention.

A follow-up question on which issue is more prevalent and problematic revealed that toxic masculinity is more so rooted in society, and everybody experiences this phenomenon. However, toxic femininity is equally a problematic issue.

The last part of the Mentimeter activity asked the audience **what FOMO stands for** (fear of missing out), which showed that everyone in the room was familiar with

the term. The discussion also showed that the phenomena existed before the prevalence of internet use and social media (albeit with different names, such as social anxiety) but have rapidly increased in this social media era. It was noted that 69 per cent of people experience FOMO today.

Before closing their session, the young people invited the participants in the room to play a Kahoot game focused on facts related to the discussion topics of this session, which concluded the workshop on an informative yet entertaining note.

Workshop 3: Pornography and sexualisation of the internet

The workshop began with a youth presentation highlighting the impact of inappropriate content online and sharing related case studies. The young people conducted a survey, involving 169 participants, which revealed that 50 per cent of teens take no action when encountering inappropriate online content that makes them feel uncomfortable or seems wrong. In relation to mental health and well-being, it has been noted that prolonged exposure to violence can numb the emotional responses to real-life incidents. It was noted that violent content may also increase aggressive thoughts and behaviours, especially in young people. Common effects of violent online content include anxiety, depression and trauma, particularly in vulnerable groups like children. The youth presenters highlighted that young people may struggle to distinguish fantasy from reality and, likewise, may lack coping mechanisms for dealing with disturbing content. Beyond that, the youth presenters also proposed potential solutions to prevent inappropriate content online:

- better content moderation;
- legal regulations;
- digital literacy;
- reporting harmful content;
- limited exposure.

The young people concluded their presentation by presenting survey results, revealing that 47 per cent of the interviewed children frequently encounter violent content on social media or websites, while 47.6 per cent encounter it only occasionally.

Another important topic emerging from the survey was body shaming. As a result, young people begin to measure their self-worth solely based on their sexuality and physical appearance.

The youth-led workshop continued with a presentation from Kyprianos (Cyprus) and Philippos (Greece) on the topic of pornography. They discussed the impact of exposure to pornography on children and young people. Pornography reinforces harmful gender roles and may trigger sexually aggressive behaviours among peers. It also encourages a culture of sexualisation and physical perfectionism that may lead to dissatisfaction and psychological harm later in life. In addition, pornography is sometimes used by teenagers as a coping mechanism for uneasiness, which may lead to emotional dependency. As a result, young people can struggle to develop balanced, respectful, and emotionally intimate connections. They also pointed out that pornography can distort young people's perception of sexual intercourse, contributing to today's victim-blaming culture and acts of sexual violence. Crucially, the youth pointed out the investments in security against pornography sites, including the development of filtering and monitoring systems to protect current and future generations. They concluded that educational institutions can positively impact responsible internet use through media literacy programmes and collaboration with experts.

Marta (Croatia) and Mia (Croatia) drew attention to sexual harassment and online grooming. After introducing and clarifying the concept of online grooming, they highlighted that digital platforms make it easier for predators to target children in spaces like video game chats or live streams. While all children are at risk, girls aged 13-17, LGBTQIA+ youth, and children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. Children who experience grooming often face long-term mental health

issues. In addition, Marta and Mia outlined the tactics which groomer may use and steps how to stay safe online. The key point was the education of children.

Another key topic was sextortion and the danger of deepfakes, which were presented by Andrea (Italy) and Zuzanna (Poland). They highlighted that young people are often targeted, especially boys aged 14-17. Victims of sextortion and deepfakes often experience fear, shame and isolation, with some cases leading to suicidal thoughts. The youths pointed out that deepfake tools are easily accessible, enabling the creation of fake intimate images without consent, which causes a risk, especially for young people. Andrea and Zuzanna presented some survey results, revealing that 74.4 per cent of the young people interviewed reported feeling pressured to share explicit content by someone online. The following solutions potential solutions were identified:

- Education and support: schools should teach digital safety, and accessible mental health resources should be made available to support victims.
- Stronger policies are needed to quickly detect and remove deepfake content in social media and file-sharing sites.
- Legal actions.
- Fingerprint technologies and online security.

The Youth Panellists concluded that 8 in 10 teens would like to receive more education on how to handle situations involving online sexual content, harassment, and safety.

In bringing the session to a close, the following question was posed by a workshop participant: *“as young people, would it be better for you to be fully protected, or would you prefer to explore, given that children are naturally curious?”*

The youth responded that nothing will ever be perfect or ideal. The focus should be on education... and practical education, not just theoretical. Everything begins with education, especially when it comes to filtering information. Unfortunately, education systems often neglect this crucial topic.

Workshop 4: Cyberbullying and hate online

A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



This session was hosted by BIK Youth Panellists Marta (Portugal), Aisling (Ireland), Marikki (Finland), Jake (Malta) and Erikas (Lithuania). They were joined online by International Youth Panelists Jaden (Ghana) and Fadzai (Australia).

The workshop kicked off with a video created by the young people outlining their country's perspective on cyberbullying. The video features young people from Finland, Ireland, Malta, Portugal and Australia.

Following the video, through an interactive poll, the youth highlighted that cyberbullying is nuanced. The youth showed different statements (e.g., "You do realise that people laugh about you, right?", "Do you ever think before posting?") with participants in the room and online responding if they would qualify the statements as cyberbullying, criticism or a simple joke. There was only one statement (1 of 10) where not all three categories showed up in the vote. So, it became clear that cyberbullying is not always easy to identify.

In the next part of the workshop, the youth presented respective legislations or actions on tackling cyberbullying in their country:

- **Ireland:** Coco's law – At the age of 21, Nicole Fox, an Irish girl also known as "Coco", took her own life after being bullied online for years. This spurred

the development of “Coco’s law”. Since the law is in place the government is taking several actions in Ireland, including magnetic phone pouches that will be introduced in all secondary schools from 2025.

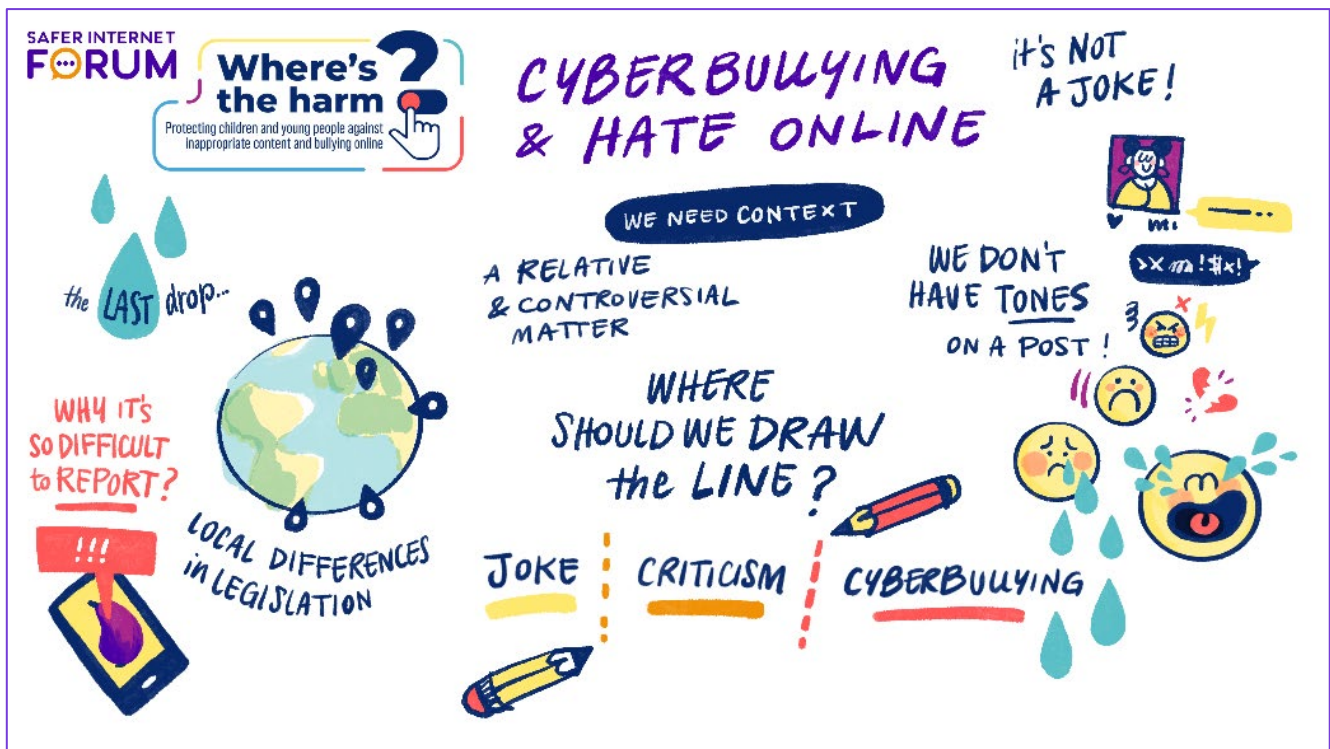
- **Australia:** The eSafety commissioner was an important milestone in Australia. The Online Safety Act (OSA, 2021).
- **Ghana:** Cyberbullying is not so much in focus in Ghana: it’s not explicitly defined, recognised or addressed. Electronic Transactions Act, 2008 and the Data Protection Act, 2012. The youth participant stressed, however, that there also needs to be someone enforcing this law.
- **Finland:** There is no specific law for cyberbullying, but in Finland, regular laws are being applied equally to the digital environment. Cyberbullying can be a crime when someone spreads harmful, hurtful or false information. Abuse and threats online can also be considered as crimes.
- **Malta:** The Maltese government takes the issue of cyberbullying very seriously, and is running awareness campaigns, so that young people and adults are equally aware that they can report cyberbullying to the police.
- **Portugal:** Cyberbullying in Portugal is addressed through the criminal/penal code. Furthermore, Portugal is running many initiatives and campaigns to combat cyberbullying (e.g., Safe School programme, collaboration with the Victim Support Association (APAV), etc.).

Following these interventions, the group highlighted reporting mechanisms on various social media platforms by showing a demo on how to report cyberbullying and hateful content on Discord and Instagram. This resulted in the conclusion that reporting cyberbullying on different apps is so much more difficult than leaving a hateful comment. The order should be the other way around. Reporting must become more low-threshold and quicker. It’s a multi-step process with lots of criteria to select from in all apps. Reporting should be easier: “This is not okay – we need to change this.”

Linked to this, the group concluded the workshop by introducing a final activity with the audience on-site and online, asking them to stand up (thumb-up) or stay seated (thumb-down) if they agree with certain messages, for example:

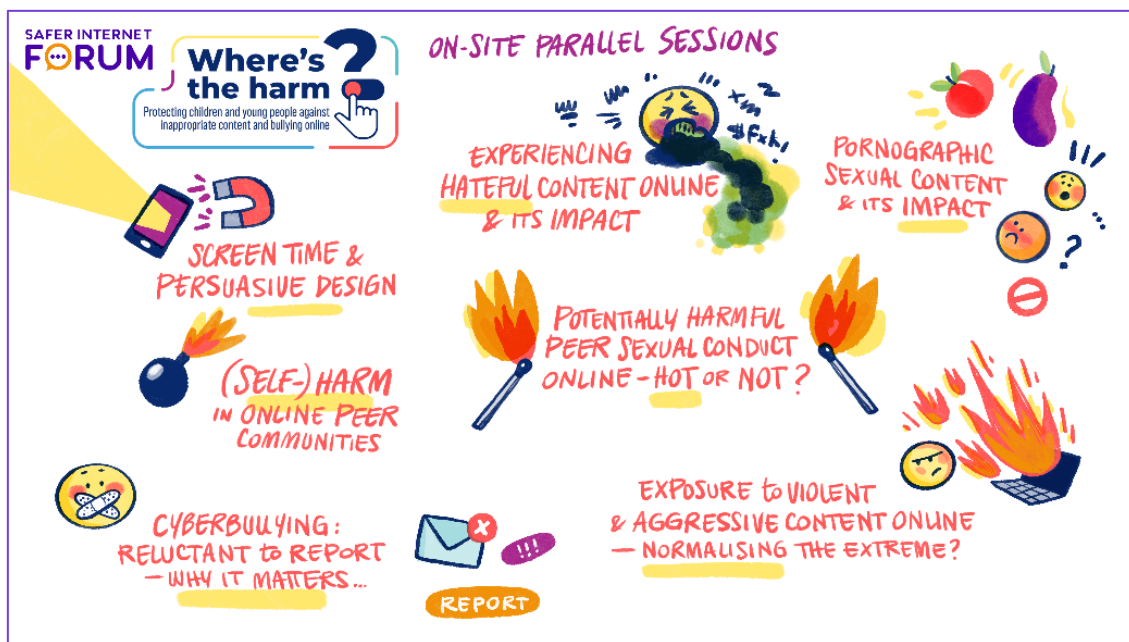
- Is it rude to leave a message unread or not to reply?
- It is easier to “be yourself” online than in real life.
- Making a mean comment online about someone once is cyberbullying.

Looking towards an ideal future, cyberbullying would be eradicated and more focus would be put on creating more empathy and kindness among people.



Deep dive sessions: Young people's harmful experiences online

As is typical of the Safer Internet Forum, participants had the opportunity to participate in parallel deep dive sessions. Each session commenced with an analysis of the current state of play, with input from a mix of researchers, policymakers and other professionals and experts, including youth. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how the problem is evolving and what solutions to aim for against the background of emerging technological developments such as generative AI and ongoing changes in the EU regulatory landscape.



Deep dive 1: Young people's exposure to violent and aggressive content online – normalising the extreme?

Martijn Huigslout from NICAM, the Netherlands, addressed the pressing issue of young people's exposure to violent and aggressive content online. He emphasised the role of platforms, parents, and educators in mitigating the risks associated with internet addiction and harmful online material.

Strategies for reducing internet addiction include:

- Platforms: Introduce reminders and technical controls to limit excessive use.
- Parents: Adapt control measures to individual children's needs and responses.
- Teachers: Integrate digital literacy into school curricula to educate young people on managing online exposure.

Martijn highlighted NICAM's co-regulatory approach under the Dutch Media Act. Initiatives include:

- **PEGI system (Pan-European Game Information):** Assessing harmful elements in games before market entry.
- **IARC system (International Age Rating Coalition):** A unified app rating system to classify and protect content.
- **Kijkwijzer (Watch wiser):** A visual classification system based on child development research. Creators self-classify their content, supported by technical protection measures for parental control.

NICAM also engages scientific committees and advisory boards to ensure objectivity and address issues like machine learning biases. Parental engagement is high, with 90 per cent using Kijkwijzer, and 91 per cent finding it reliable.

Martijn outlined challenges with platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, especially concerning their autoplay algorithms. Recent research revealed significant graphic violence in online content, particularly non-fiction. Risk behaviours, such as idolised physical harm or substance abuse, also pose concerns.

TikTok and YouTube shorts were flagged for vague content classification and autoplay, which inhibits informed choices. Efforts to co-create protective measures, like content warning banners, raised trust issues but were deemed necessary.

Future goals and key priorities include:

- Adapting to the new Dutch Media Law and European Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) by 2024.

- Establishing a global standardised framework for content regulation.
- Enhancing education to help young people navigate rights and responsibilities online.

Regarding addressing reporting barriers, reporting processes are perceived as cumbersome, with limited effectiveness. Special consideration is required for children and particularly those with additional needs. Martijn emphasised that protective solutions must involve young people and focus on education, standardisation, and ease of reporting.

In conclusion, safeguarding young people online requires collaboration between stakeholders, informed regulation, and proactive education efforts.

The second part of this deep dive session was delivered via a video contribution by **Rachel Madden**, Assistant Director of Policy for Children and Vulnerable Adults at Coimisiún na Meán, Ireland's agency for developing and regulating a thriving, diverse, creative, safe, and trusted media landscape. [Watch Rachel's video contribution in full here.](#)

Deep dive 2: Cyberbullying: reluctance to report, and why it matters

The session started with a presentation from **Roberta Mestichella** from the Italian Postal and Cybersecurity Police. Established in 1988, the Postal and Cybersecurity Police is the cyber agency of the Italian National Police. It operates in synergy with schools and other institutions, and conducts awareness-raising activities in collaboration with the Italian Safer Internet Centre.

Roberta noted that Italy was the first country to introduce cyberbullying into its legal system in 2017. As such, the term is now defined in the national law and perpetrators of the act are prosecuted accordingly. Moreover, the law provides tools for the protection of minors who suffer acts of cyberbullying. It also provides the means to start processes independently to remove harmful content online, and this also extends to some other crimes related to cyberbullying. In this context, the

Postal and Cybersecurity Police have full jurisdiction in fighting cybercrime in Italy. It was also noted that the law also established that every school must identify a cyberbullying contact point.

Roberta also mentioned that there is a constant and progressive lowering of the age of access and exposure to online content and digital devices, with a consequent increase in the number of reports relating to illegal acts where victims are under the age of 13. This is why digital education is considered a key element in fighting cyberbullying and other online threats. In that context, the police also conduct targeted communication initiatives to raise awareness of cyber threats, specifically aimed at students.

More specifically, Roberta screened a short video of a collaborative project between the Postal and Cybersecurity Police, the Ministry of Education, and the Italian Safer Internet Centre which aims to provide extensive cyberbullying prevention education through a mobile education centre that travels across Italy and neighbouring countries.

Next, **Manon Gonnin** from Association e-Enfance/3018 (the helpline strand of the French Safer Internet Centre) presented the organisation's approach to tackling cyberbullying and other online threats. e-Enfance has been recognised as an association promoting public interests since 2005, and has operated a helpline service since 2008 to combat all sorts of harassment and digital violence against children and teenagers. In this context, it provides educational support targeted at primary, middle and high-school level students, as well as parents and educational professionals. Themes covered in its workshops include screens and health, cyberbullying, relationships, personal data, online challenges, scams, sextortion, gambling, and more.

The helpline service operates throughout the week between 09:00 and 23:00, providing free, anonymous and confidential counselling services via phone and chat, as well as private messaging through a dedicated app. The service is staffed by psychologists and legal experts.

Manon also presented the reasons why victims of cyberbullying may choose not to report the act. These included:

- Fear of reprisals from the offender if they know the victim has reported the incident.
- The fear of parents for reasons such as their potential reaction, religious views, punishment (i.e., a ban on phone use), domestic violence, and so on.
- The fear of the situation itself (the victim might be too scared to even think of reporting the incident).
- The fear of the police (the victim might be scared of being judged for what happened).
- Thinking that reporting will not make any difference or that nobody can help them (for example, that the platform won't respond to the report, the police will not care about the report, and that no action will be taken).

Manon stressed the importance of taking screenshots of any evidence, reporting the perpetrators, and blocking them immediately in such situations. She also emphasised that platforms and authorities do take action and, therefore, reporting is crucial. In this context, the French helpline also assists the victims in reporting and removal. On average, problematic content or accounts reported to e-Enfance are deleted within an hour.

The helpline also operates a dedicated mobile app, which provides an instant contact line to the helpline. The app also provides safe storage for evidence to be reported, a self-assessment quiz to help users better understand their situation, and access to relevant information on rights and advice.

The last presentation of the cyberbullying deep dive session was delivered by BIK Youth Ambassadors **Vincent** (Croatia), **Sanya** (Italy) and **João** (Portugal).

During their presentation, the young people gave examples of the existing national laws in various EU member states that cover online risks. The examples included laws and regulations from Estonia, Finland, Ireland and Romania, along with an overview of the extent to which they cover issues such as cyberbullying.

In relation to that, they also detailed the Italian law and the reporting process in this context. According to this law, minors older than 14 years old can request the removal of harmful content by themselves; if they are younger than 14 years old, they can do so with the support of at least one parent. The platforms must then confirm receipt of request within 24 hours, and confirm the removal of the harmful content within 24 hours after the confirmation of receipt. After this initial process, if the platform fails to confirm receipt of the request within the first 24 hours or fails to confirm the removal afterwards in the allocated time, the minor has the right to send a request to the data protection authority. Subsequently, the authorities conduct a fast investigation, and within 48 hours, they can order the removal of the said content and sanction the platform accordingly.

Through a Mentimeter activity, the BIK Youth Ambassadors also touched upon the issue of children and young people refraining from reporting cases of cyberbullying and other online problems. In this context, to a question on what percentage of young people in Europe have been a victim of cyberbullying, the participants in the room responded between 30 and 70 per cent. The BIK youth Ambassadors revealed that the real ratio is only 14 per cent, and this is likely because most young people do not report and go unnoticed. This was also supported by another question in the Mentimeter which noted that, on average, only 14,000 reports are received by the helplines in a year, which is much lower than expected when considering the prevalence of such incidents.

Reiterating the previous discussions, the reasons for children and young people not to report were noted as:

- **Courage:** Children and young people need to know that there are places where they can safely report problems and that their concerns will be addressed.
- **Knowledge:** Many children and young people are unaware of how to report issues, and the process can be lengthy and difficult. If platforms are unable to take action, efforts may be in vain.

- The terms and conditions are too long and hard to read and understand for young people.

In relation to this, the BIK Youth Ambassadors suggested that there should be more awareness-raising campaigns, not only to inform but also to have the young people actively take part, which can support their learning. On the side of online platforms, it is essential to simplify the reporting processes, make the terms and conditions easier to read and understand, and respond swiftly to any reports.

Following the presentation of the BIK Youth Ambassadors, the session ended with brief table discussions focusing on key challenges in tackling this kind of content and key actions or solutions at a national or European level. It was noted that clear, comprehensive, easily accessible and easy-to-read regulations are needed to govern the online environment. It is also important to create the necessary awareness for users to access the regulations and tools available to them. A one stop shop portal to provide all necessary information in these regards would be very helpful. The new Better Internet for Kids (BIK) platform provides exactly that with [reporting guidance, information, and links to national Safer Internet Centres in 24 national languages](#).

Deep dive 3: Pornographic sexual content and its impact on young people

In this deep dive session, participants discussed children's and young people's access and exposure to pornographic sexual content, including AI-generated content online and its impact.

Manon Cassoulet-Fressineau from ARCOM, the independent French regulator for audiovisual and digital communication, provided an overview of the organisation's role as the designated Digital Services Coordinator (DSC) in France. ARCOM has established an observatory to monitor the online habits of 20,000 French internet users over the age of 12, revealing that pornographic websites are particularly popular among minors, with 33 per cent of 12 to 17-year-olds visiting Pornhub. YouTube remains the most frequented platform by this age group.

To combat minors' exposure to pornographic content, France has legally prohibited such access for decades. However, many pornographic platforms do not comply. In 2019, President Emmanuel Macron announced measures including age verification for these sites and default parental controls on devices for minors. An amendment to the French penal code in 2020 established stricter requirements for age verification and allowed ARCOM to block non-compliant websites.

ARCOM is currently responsible for defining technical requirements for age verification systems, which will be enforced from January 2025. High fines are in place for non-compliance. Additionally, French NGOs have successfully blocked four non-compliant pornographic sites through the courts.

Despite ongoing political initiatives and legislation requiring manufacturers to install parental control tools by default, these tools remain underutilised. ARCOM believes effective EU-level regulations are essential for protecting minors online and endorses key measures like balancing privacy with effectiveness, ensuring effective age assurance, and enhancing enforcement on very large online platforms (VLOPs).

Carolina Soares from the Portuguese Safer Internet Centre highlighted the alarming prevalence of minors being exposed to harmful digital content, particularly through platforms like WhatsApp, and emphasised the critical role of schools, parents, and authorities in combating these issues. She presented two specific cases from the Portuguese helpline.

- In case study 1 ("Let's beat a group record"), she discussed an incident in which a 10-year-old boy was repeatedly added to a WhatsApp group distributing obscene material, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The challenge, in this case, was that the school was unable to give any support as the mobile phone used in this incident was a private device. Another factor which made it particularly difficult to tackle this case was WhatsApp's group mechanics, and the wide geographical dispersion, which hindered a coordinated collective action.
- In case study 2 ("Sharing content in a class WhatsApp group"), she reported on an incident in which a 17-year-old girl was exposed to explicit content.

This escalated into direct harassment and bullying by peers, which exacerbated the emotional toll on the victim. A particular challenge in this case was that the school dismissed the acts as a 'joke among peers'. The fear of stigma discouraged the mother and daughter from proceeding with legal action.

Carolina closed her presentation by outlining some key takeaways and recommendations: First, she stressed that schools must adopt policies on handling such cases, explicitly addressing cyberbullying and exposure to explicit content. Furthermore, she emphasised how critical strong alliances and collaboration between parents, teachers, and legal authorities are. Lastly, she underscored the importance of raising children's and young people's awareness about risks online.

Gabrielle Gane, a child therapist based at the Paris Psychology Centre, presented her research on the risks associated with online explicit content, particularly its impact on adolescents and individuals at risk of exposure to deviant materials, such as child sexual exploitation material (CSEM). Her study, titled [Blurring the Lines \(open access download available\)](#), which she co-authored together with her colleagues Paul Watters, Richard Wortley and Jeremy Prichard, explores how exposure to internet pornography—often aggressive and male-dominated—can distort healthy psychosexual development and lead to unhealthy behaviours and attitudes.

The study highlights the prevalence of pornography among adolescents, with 43 per cent accessing it weekly. With mainstream platforms normalising aggressive and exploitative themes, adolescents are at risk of desensitisation, fostering unrealistic and harmful sexual norms. The ambiguity of video tags further exacerbates the problem; teens often encounter deviant content unintentionally while searching for mainstream material. Over time, exposure can escalate to viewing more extreme content, normalising harmful behaviours and attitudes.

The research also underscores pathways to CSEM exposure. Many offenders report beginning with legal mainstream content before progressing to deviant material due to desensitisation, curiosity, and the vast availability of explicit content online. Tags

such as “barely legal” contribute to this risk by eroticising minors under the guise of legality.

To address these risks, her study analysed 145 video tags from a popular pornography site, categorising them into dimensions such as mainstream, underage, incestual, and aggressive. Experts rated the tags for potential harm, revealing that non-mainstream categories posed significantly higher risks to psychosexual development. The findings stress the need for urgent action to prevent inadvertent exposure to harmful content.

Gabrielle recommended stricter regulations to control the creation of tags and the vetting of uploaded content. Platforms should also implement systems to remove illegal material retrospectively. Educational efforts must be prioritised to raise adolescents' awareness about the potential risks of online explicit content. She concludes that these measures are vital for creating a safer digital environment and safeguarding youth from harmful influences.

Following the presentations, the following table discussions focused on the following two questions:

- What are the key challenges in tackling young people’s exposure to online pornography?
- What are the key solutions and actions that need to be taken nationally and on an EU level?

Several themes emerged in the ensuing discussion:

- **Challenges in parenting and awareness**

Parents often struggle to monitor their children’s online activity or discuss sensitive topics like pornography, leaving young people even more vulnerable. Many children and young people encounter explicit content accidentally, often via pop-ups or on parents’ devices, and feel too ashamed to seek help. This lack of communication and guidance exacerbates the issue.

- **Challenges with platform and content regulation**
Online platforms prioritise profit over safety, normalising harmful content and allowing easy access through weak age verification processes. AI-generated explicit material and sites like OnlyFans further expose young people to damaging influences, potentially encouraging risky behaviours.
- **Solutions through education and parental control tools**
The discussions emphasised that education is key. Schools should teach children and young people about online risks, while parents and teachers must be equipped to guide and protect them. If widely adopted and user-friendly, enhanced parental controls can prevent exposure to harmful content. Awareness campaigns can empower children and young people to respond effectively when they encounter explicit material.
- **Regulatory and ethical interventions**
Stronger regulation is needed to enforce robust age verification, ban explicit pop-ups, and establish reliable reporting systems. Providing ethical, age-appropriate alternatives to harmful material can reduce the demand for unethical, inappropriate and harmful content.

In summary, the discussion in this session highlighted practical, accessible solutions like parental controls, education, and open dialogue among children and young people, parents, and educators. Collaborative action is essential to protect young people from online harms.

Deep dive 4: Potentially harmful peer sexual conduct online – is it “hot” or should they not?

This deep dive session focused on peer sexual conduct and sexting among young people. Discussions addressed the normalisation of sexting, peer pressure, and the role of social media platforms in facilitating these behaviours. Participants emphasised the need for early education on online safety, with a focus on gender dynamics and the pressures faced by both girls and boys. The session highlighted the importance of providing support, reducing stigma, and ensuring stronger

platform policies and legal protections to safeguard young people from exploitation and harm.

Maria Thell, from ECPAT Sweden, outlined her organisation's role as a child rights organisation dedicated to combating the sexual exploitation of children. Its approach prioritises qualitative and participative methods to raise awareness and engage stakeholders effectively. ECPAT Sweden's operations focus on three key areas:

- Children and young people: engaging directly to empower and educate.
- Parents and adults close to children: supporting their role in safeguarding children.
- The ECPAT Hotline: a confidential and safe space where children and young people can seek advice, support, or simply a listening ear.

Maria went on to provide some insights from ECPAT's Nude På Nätet (Nude online) survey; an annual initiative that gathers insights from children and young people aged 10 to 17 about their experiences with online sexual exploitation. Key findings from the 2023 report indicate that women reported higher rates of victimisation across all categories than young men, and the most common issues are receiving unsolicited nude images, or being offered money for nude images. Most offenders are peers under the age of 18. When money is involved, adult offenders are more common.

ECPAT Sweden recognises that sexting has become a normalised part of youth behaviour in the digital age, reflecting broader trends of sexual exploration. The organisation stresses that sharing images is not inherently problematic; the issues arise from how these images are misused or exploited. Through its hotline, ECPAT works to alleviate the guilt often felt by young people who have shared images, providing empathetic support and reassurance.

As one of its activities, ECPAT Sweden facilitates workshops with young people to discuss the critical question: "Who is responsible?" for the leakage or spread of nude images online. Key insights from these discussions include:

- Personal responsibility: emphasis on individual actions and choices.
- Platform accountability: a shared belief that platforms could take significant action but often lack interest or motivation.
- Judicial system: seen as potentially vital but perceived as disinterested and ineffective.
- Role of schools: viewed as having a key responsibility but lacking knowledge and proactive engagement.

Dr Zoe Hilton introduced Praesidio, a globally-recognised agency specialising in online safety, working across the digital policy landscape to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people in the online environment. She went on to present the results of two key studies conducted by Praesidio, offering insights into the challenges children face online and potential strategies for prevention and support:

Study 1: Child self-generated sexual material online: children's and young people's perspectives

This study explored how children and young people perceive the creation and sharing of self-generated sexual material and the support they need. The research was conducted in Ghana, Ireland, and Thailand to compare the influence of the global internet culture with localised social and cultural factors.

The study utilised in-depth, participatory methods with small groups of children to capture diverse experiences and opinions. Key findings included:

- Prevalence and gendered dynamics: self-generated sexual material is a common phenomenon, with gender playing a significant role in shaping experiences.
- Motivations and concerns: children cited a mix of motivations for engaging in this behaviour, including excitement, connection, coercion, and financial exploitation.

- Negative experiences, such as pressure, stigma, and exploitation, were prevalent concerns.
- Role of social media: the design and content of social media platforms can actively facilitate the creation and sharing of self-generated sexual material.
- Cultural stigma: the cultural divide between online norms and offline expectations fosters shame and stigma, discouraging help-seeking and exacerbating bullying and mental health issues.
- Barriers to reporting: children expressed reluctance to report to the police due to fears of criminalisation and distrust in law enforcement.
- Support needs: there is a significant demand for confidential support, especially in cases where children lose control of their material.
- Education gaps: the absence of effective education in school leaves children relying on social media or pornography for information.
- Boys' experiences: boys reported feelings of isolation, as discussing emotions and vulnerabilities are often less culturally accepted for them.
- Children's recommendations: introduce early, comprehensive, and inclusive education in schools, with a focus on online safety and healthy relationships.
- Develop gender-sensitive approaches, addressing the different challenges boys and girls face.
- Engage technology companies to improve platform accountability and introduce safety features.

Study 2: Shifting the dial: preventing self-generated sexual abuse

This study aimed to explore methods for preventing self-generated sexual abuse among children aged 11–13 by examining their experiences with sexting education, messaging, and potential technological interventions. The study involved discussions with 111 children (58 girls and 53 boys) aged 11–17 from English and Welsh schools, organised into 13 focus groups. The key findings included:

- There are various barriers to effective education:

- Many participants reported receiving no specific education on sexual image sharing, or only superficial coverage.
- Small, gender-based group discussions are preferred for more open and meaningful engagement.
- Education should begin earlier in secondary school, as current efforts often come too late.
- There are various preferences when it comes to messaging:
- Understanding healthy relationships was identified as a priority for educational content.
- Girls emphasised the need for messaging to address the gendered nature of experiences, such as boys pressuring girls for images and girls facing harassment.
- Boys need targeted messaging to help them understand the harm caused by pressuring others for images.
- Technology can be used as a preventative tool:
- The study tested a “just-in-time” nudge feature on Snapchat, where users were prompted with a question before sending a nude image.
- Results indicated that introducing friction significantly reduced the reported likelihood of sharing sensitive content.

The findings from both studies highlight the complex challenges of online safety and the need for a collaborative approach involving education, support systems, and technological innovation.

The last speaker of this session was **Sharone Franco** from Yubo. Yubo, which launched in France in 2016, is a social media platform with over 3 million users. It aims to address the loneliness epidemic by focusing on social discovery and fostering safe, real-life connections. The platform was initially designed for Gen Z users and stands out for its unique features that prioritise safety and interaction over performance. As such, there are several key differentiating factors of Yubo:

- There is a focus on interaction over performance: Yubo is not a content-sharing platform. Instead, it encourages interactions and connections among users.
- Yubo avoids likes and follows, reducing social pressure and performance anxiety.
- Yubo applies safety by design principles. Every feature is developed with a safety-first approach to ensure secure interactions.

In terms of safety by design, Yubo employs a preventative strategy to safeguard users from harmful content and unsafe interactions. Key measures include:

Strict content policies:

- Zero-tolerance policies for nudity, violence, and other harmful content.
- An algorithm that blocks inappropriate content before it is shared.
- Users receive educational prompts if they attempt to share suggestive material.

Advanced age assurance:

- Age estimation is conducted through video selfies, ensuring users are placed into appropriate age groups.
- Partnering with Yoti, a provider of identity and age verification services, Yubo ensures accuracy in age classification.
- Users are grouped into age gates (e.g., 13–15), and further documentation is required if age cannot be confidently verified.
- 40 per cent of active users have verified their identity using official ID documents.

Content moderation and real-time intervention in live rooms:

- Algorithms analyse live screenshots in real-time, automatically closing rooms with high-certainty violations (e.g., nudity, threats, violence).
- Moderation teams are notified for less clear cases.

Real-time alerts:

- Users violating community guidelines receive alerts; over 95 per cent of users comply immediately, indicating the effectiveness of this educational intervention.

Moderation actions:

- A dedicated 24/7 moderation team monitors rooms and enforces policies by issuing alerts, closing rooms, or blocking devices.
- Penalties range from temporary to permanent device bans, depending on the severity and frequency of violations.

Yubo are finding these proactive approaches - using nudges to alert users to potential violations of the community guidelines - to be really effective, with 95 per cent of users changing their behaviour as a result.

The benefits of safety by design approaches that can be useful in mitigating risks and harms online for children and young people are clear. The Digital Services Act requires platforms to prioritise user safety when building a product or updating its features, so it is hoped that similar approaches will start to emerge.

Deep dive 5: Disarm the (self-)harm in online peer communities (e.g. suicide, anorexia, humiliation)

This deep dive session focused on harm and self-harm in online peer communities.

Andy Burrows from the Molly Rose Foundation (MRF) was the first to speak and informed the participants that it was the anniversary of Molly Rose's death, which occurred in 2017. He went on to explain Molly's story and how she had not shown any outward signs of poor mental health which added to the shock after she died by suicide. This tragedy spurred her parents to research what could have led their daughter to this end, and they discovered that her social media was full of content promoting and romanticising self-harm. This led to the creation of the Foundation in her memory.

Andy then shared statistics of Molly's online life in the final six months of her life. Over 2,100 algorithmically recommended items of suicide and self-harm content were discovered. Besides the content on her social media, she received emails from different platforms with subjects such as "things you might like" based on content she had interacted with – which was more self-harm content. Consequently, the Molly Rose Foundation is focused on tech accountability and claims that many big platforms have known about the negative impacts of their content for a long time. As part of the Digital Services Act (DSA), the European Commission has made it a requirement for big platforms to share data, including when harmful content is flagged. TikTok and Pinterest contain the highest volume of negative content, but Andy made the case that other big platforms need to invest in technology to detect harmful content, too. On a more positive note, Andy stated that progress has been made in the last seven years and that various laws and protections have been put in place.

BIK Youth participants who were present were asked what stood out to them. Their answers reflected that the presentation had changed their way of thinking. One youth said that Molly's story proves that big companies do not care about teenagers at all, only money.

Another question was directed to the young people, asking if they had witnessed the truth of Andy's presentation in their own lives. They answered that they have noticed that simply seeing something harmful means that it will pop up again.

The youth were also asked if they reported things they did not like. They answered that they do, but that it doesn't seem like it helps. They explained that TikTok is easier to report, but there is an overall feeling that not much is done on other platforms. They also explained that the process of reporting such content on TikTok is quick and simple but more tedious on, for example, Instagram. However, there was a general feeling that once a report is made on Instagram, it gets dealt with, whereas TikTok does not seem to act. One youth explained that she often reports hateful comments, which the platform does not recognise as hateful. It was noted that people can get around the monitoring system by captioning the content with a

fake trigger warning. Andy continued that even if a platform did a decent job at following its terms and conditions of use, it would still only catch some of the content due to the resharing feature. This also triggered a discussion about people who post harmful content using emojis, in-word punctuation, or numbers as letters to circumvent platforms' monitoring systems.

Niels Christian Bilenberg from the Center for Digital Youth Care in Denmark (part of the Danish Safer Internet Centre) gave his insights into why young people (and people in general) join groups that they know beforehand have harmful content. He moved the conversation from content that pops up on the general feed, to people who actively seek out such content and why they do it.

Following a brief introduction, Niels Christian shared the statistic that 15-20 per cent of calls to the Danish helpline concern self-harm. He suggested four typical scenarios:

- Finding a community that understands and resonates with you.
- Finding tools on how to self-harm.
- Self-baiting – where people purposefully search for content which they know will hurt them.
- Auto-trolling – creating fake accounts to bully their private accounts.

Niels Christian then shared a Danish case study of women coming forward and revealing a secret network of self-harm on Instagram in 2020. After some time in the secret network, some users reported to have become more extreme in their self-harming.

Niels asked whether these communities are supporting people, holding back people, or worsening these issues? He answered that all three were acting together.

Niels Christian went on to explain the nuances in why people get involved in such communities. It does not stop at a desire for connection, but there is also the motivation to be good at something, to maintain poor mental well-being or even to get worse, especially when a person's identity lies in their mental health. He stated that the platforms and industry bear a huge responsibility in this. People may seek

it out, but the platforms need to do more to identify and remove self-harm content from their services.

Niels Christian then argued that the way to do this is not via a social media ban. These communities existed before social media, but social media has made it easier for a broader community to find these communities. What used to be a niche group, is now much more mainstream. He advised that professionals working with young people must be aware of how they speak about these communities. They must acknowledge the good reasons for being there. They must also realise it is a lengthy process with relapses. He reiterated that it is important to identify the individual motivation behind self-harm to be able to present usable alternatives. In this regard, he offered a practical example from the Danish Safer Internet Centre. Its website offers a page called "Group chat" where people can go to speak to people individually.

Besides platforms and professionals, Niels asked what we are doing as a society to understand why so many young people are struggling with mental well-being. He concluded by stating: "Asking how you feel all the time, makes you think more about how you feel."

Henry Adams then took the floor to introduce himself and his organisation. Resolver is concerned with trust and safety intelligence, helping to maintain a safe user experience by monitoring the darkest corners of the internet. From this perspective, Henry shared that platforms do indeed do a lot to protect users. He stated that (most) platforms employ a multi-faceted approach based on a model of protect, prepare, pursue, and prevent.

Protect:

- Most platforms have a baseline approach and guidelines for the use of their services. In live videos, for example, any reference to self-harm or suicide will be shut down.
- The guidelines are informed by expert teams.

- There are systems, tools, and processes in place because rules are irrelevant if you cannot enforce them.

Prepare:

- Offering resources for help: this is when platforms offer help using either a block with resources or active redirection to a website for to seek help and support.
- Provide tips and best practices which help people think more deeply about the content they are sharing or viewing.

Pursue:

- Detect and moderate.
- Platforms build personas to see what the algorithm suggests (they also ask companies like Resolver to do this).
- Disrupt and investigate to differentiate bad actors from vulnerable users.
- Implement scaled responses.

Prevent:

- Various measures to prevent the risk of harm.

Henry then introduced certain kinds of individuals and groups that intentionally seek out vulnerable users and push them towards self-harm. These groups have a lot of content flagged and removed, but their content spans over various harmful topics (self-harm, terrorism, violence, and so on).

To help the participants look forward, Henry spoke about POP (Protection through Online Participation): a collaborative global vision of a world where children and young people can safely access support and referral systems through online means, having increased possibilities to receive support, either from their peers or official services. There is legislation for digital safety, but it is also needed to ensure continued online participation because the potential for positivity needs to be protected.

Henry also highlighted signal sharing, which is when a platform finds concerning content and shares it within legal constructs, with other platforms to have an ecosystem-wide impact on shutting the content or creator down. However, there is also a concern that signal sharing may have a role in self-harm. This is a topic that the industry is currently dealing with, including its impact on privacy rights.

The rest of the session was given over to participant discussion in small groups, exploring key challenges in this area, alongside key actions, at national and EU levels, to combat self-harm online.

Deep dive 6: How do young people experience hateful content online , and what impact is it having?

Katie Freeman-Tayler from Internet Matters began this session by presenting Andrew Tate. He is a prominent figure in the “manosphere” (a term used to describe a network of online influencers who target male audiences), who gained significant online attention, amassing over 14 billion views on TikTok before his removal in 2022. His content, which perpetuates harmful narratives about masculinity and women, has become highly influential among young people, especially teenage boys. These narratives often frame masculinity as dominance and control, equating life to a competitive struggle for resources and status. Such ideologies present women as subordinate, fostering misogynistic attitudes.

Katie presented several findings:

- The awareness of Andrew Tate increases with age among children, with 73 per cent of 15-16-year-olds being familiar with him.
- Boys aged 15-16 are more likely to have a positive impression of him (23 per cent) compared to girls at the same age (10 per cent).
- Younger fathers are significantly more likely to view Tate positively than mothers: 56 per cent of fathers aged 25-34 expressed a favourable opinion, compared to only 19 per cent of mothers in the same age group.

Katie added that the manosphere plays a crucial role in shaping these perspectives. Figures like Sneako and Myron Gaines leverage societal challenges such as rising male anxiety, depression, poverty, and loneliness to build their followings. By capitalising on these vulnerabilities, they profit while reinforcing harmful stereotypes about gender and relationships.

Katie also highlighted the prevalence of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) among teenagers aged 13-16. A survey reveals that 14 per cent of teenagers in this age group have directly experienced some form of IBSA, equating to over 400,000 young people in the UK. This figure rises to 25 per cent when considering those who know someone affected. The perpetrators are most often other young people, illustrating the peer-driven nature of this behaviour.

Katie also highlighted the role of algorithms in terms of misogynistic content. Social media platforms often reinforce harmful beliefs by inundating users with similar content once they engage with a misogynistic post. This can lead to a normalisation of such ideologies, which then influence real-world interactions in schools, workplaces, and other social settings.

There is a need for better resources to educate parents about online misogyny and how to address it with their children. Without adequate support, many parents struggle to understand and combat the harmful ideologies their children are exposed to online. Educational hubs and awareness campaigns as potential solutions to empower parents and young people to counteract these narratives.

Katie concluded by stressing the urgent need for a multifaceted approach to address online misogyny and IBSA. This includes implementing stricter regulations to limit the spread of harmful content, expanding educational resources for parents and schools, and strengthening support systems for IBSA survivors. Additionally, continuous research and monitoring are essential to assess the impact of these issues and develop effective strategies for prevention.

Emil Ludvigsen from the Center for Digital Youth Care (part of the Danish Safer Internet) began his intervention by presenting the concept of “Salad Bar extremism” which can be influenced by world views, ideology, religion, perceived

enemy, mental disorders, and conspiracy theories. He further presented the following findings:

- Men experience more digital harassment than women because they frequent more “risky” digital environments.
- Women and minorities are victims of more hateful harassment.
- Women are attacked based on their gender.

Emil also highlighted the influence of the “manosphere”. These online communities often gravitate toward extreme solutions, including violence, manipulation, or revolutionary rhetoric. Central to these discussions is a rejection of feminism and a focus on goals like sexual conquests and male dominance. Subcultures within the manosphere include “pickup artists”, “Men Going Their Own Way” (MGTOW), and men's rights activists, each promoting specific ideologies that reinforce anti-feminist narratives. Prominent themes within these communities include enforced monogamy as a solution for men perceived to be of lower status, along with an emphasis on physical appearance. Platforms like Looksmax.org (an online community dedicated to men’s self-improvement and aesthetics) have seen a dramatic increase in engagement, with a 700 per cent rise in activity, reflecting the growing preoccupation with appearance as a marker of worth.

Hybridisation within these communities combines anti-feminist ideologies with broader cultural grievances, often blending misogyny with other forms of discrimination, such as racism and transphobia. Memes and other content perpetuate harmful stereotypes about ethnicities, religions, or LGBTQIA+ individuals, creating a pipeline that feeds into alt-right ideologies.

Emil pointed out several public figures who play a significant role in amplifying these ideologies. For example:

- Ben Shapiro gained prominence for debating college students, often using mocking rhetoric that young audiences may fail to recognise as divisive. His approach subtly reinforces anti-LGBTQIA+ and conservative ideals.

- Jordan Peterson, initially famous for resisting Canada's Bill C-16, promotes self-help advice for young men, emphasising a "fight for manhood" narrative. While he occasionally praises women, he minimises discussions of women's rights, framing them as secondary.
- Steven Crowder opposes "no-fault divorce", perpetuating traditional views on relationships.
- Elon Musk exemplifies the intersection of these ideologies, using platforms like X (formerly Twitter) to amplify shared beliefs within this network.

These individuals collectively support each other's ideologies, forming a visible and influential coalition. However, they represent only the surface of a much larger and more insidious pipeline of alt-right, misogynistic, and racist content.

Emil concluded that the growing influence of such communities and figures needs further exploration to determine why young men are drawn to them. He revealed that many victims (most of the time young men) are vulnerable individuals seeking solutions to personal struggles. They are often alienated, lonely, and searching for identity and purpose. These communities provide a sense of belonging through toxic and harmful ideologies, which can increase their appeal to those feeling disenfranchised.

The deep dive session continued with table discussions, especially focusing on what are the key challenges in tackling this type of content, and what are the key solutions that need to be developed at national and European level:

- Peer pressure, content moderation gaps, and algorithmic biases are among the challenges in terms of tackling hateful and misogynistic content.
- Many young people turn to social media for advice rather than seeking guidance from parents or trusted adults, which amplifies the role of digital platforms in shaping their beliefs and values.
- One major challenge lies in the algorithms used by social media platforms. These systems lack transparency and often perpetuate gender-based content biases. For example, young males are more likely to encounter

figures like Andrew Tate, while females are exposed to entirely different content streams. Additionally, moderation of harmful content, such as references to sexual violence, remains inconsistent, with platforms often failing to effectively curb the spread of such material.

- Parental awareness and involvement were identified as another critical challenge. Youth participants in the session shared that many parents lack the knowledge or tools to address these issues with their children, leaving young people to navigate the digital landscape alone. Without proactive conversations, children are more vulnerable to harmful ideologies and the influence of peer pressure, which reinforces these beliefs within social groups.
- To tackle this type of content, participants proposed initiating open discussions involving boys and girls, fostering a shared understanding of gender dynamics and mutual respect.
- Content regulation is another essential step. Stricter policies on the availability of pornographic and harmful material are necessary to protect young audiences from early exposure to damaging content. Regulations must be coupled with greater accountability and transparency from digital platforms, particularly regarding the algorithms that influence content visibility.
- Platforms should be required to disclose how their algorithms operate and to implement measures that prevent harmful biases.
- Early intervention is vital in shaping children's understanding of online safety and respectful interactions. Conversations about digital behaviour and healthy relationships should begin even before children are given access to devices.
- Schools and communities can play a key role in facilitating these discussions, and parental education must also be prioritised. A

comprehensive approach that engages the entire ecosystem of caregivers, educators, and policymakers is crucial.

Participants in this session concluded that tackling misogynistic content requires a collective effort that combines education, regulation, and open dialogue.

Deep dive 7: Screen time and persuasive design – who's behind the ban?

Irene López Medina, representing ALMMA (Mobile-Free Adolescence Association of Madrid), Spain, explored the features of persuasive design – for example, the various engagement tactics in apps, websites and games such as endless scrolling, push notifications, autoplay, loot boxes, freemium content, and random rewards specifically for games. Persuasive design prioritises profit over the well-being of its users. This is especially true for children and young people, who are more susceptible to these tactics and related potential harms.

Indeed, due to the neurocognitive development in children and adolescents – which only concludes around 20-25 years of age – adolescents biologically lack the full capacity for self-regulation, motivation, maturity, and willpower, which means they require adult supervision to limit screen time and content access. Children and adolescents exposed to screens without supervision are more at risk of developing addiction-prone brains and attitudes. Excessive screen time (exceeding 3 hours daily) and exposure to unsuitable content adversely affect the health and well-being of young people, impacting physical, mental, social, and emotional-sexual domains.

ALMMA's proposed solutions for tech companies and governments to counteract the negative consequences of excessive screen time include:

- Age verification with real authentication and automatic restriction of access to violent content, pornography and gambling to those under 18.
- Enhanced privacy protections, with no data collection cookies for commercial use.
- Adjustments to algorithms to prioritise minors' safety.

- Removing addictive features in apps and games aimed at minors.
- Implementing warning labels about the potential health risks in digital products for minors.
- Investing in digital training and emotional education to train staff, so they can then educate the youth.
- Firewall protection against violent, pornographic or gambling content.
- Specific devices designed and created for minors' use.

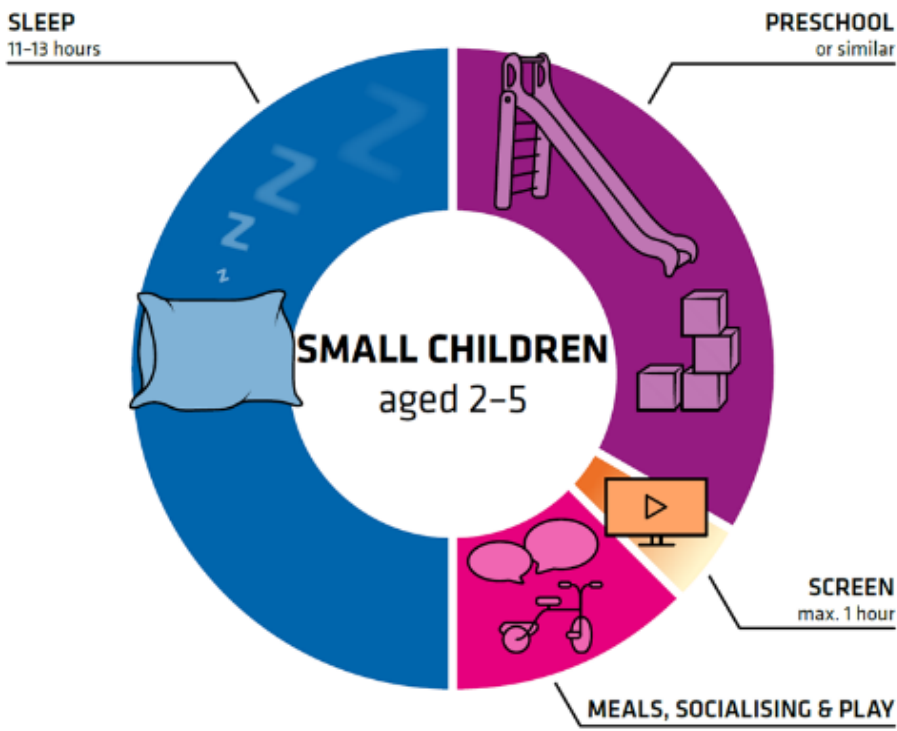
Other recommendations for families include delaying the age for the independent use of internet-connected devices, fostering education on digital risks and digital competencies, encouraging screen-free bedrooms and times of the day, alongside being a positive role model with a balanced screen time.

ALMMA's recommendations for schools include that students under 16 should be prohibited from bringing digital devices into school, and all available devices within the school setting should be school property, used for educational purposes only, and only used with adult supervision. Homework should rely primarily on text and paper, and smartphone-free areas should be set up to encourage physical activity and complete disconnection.

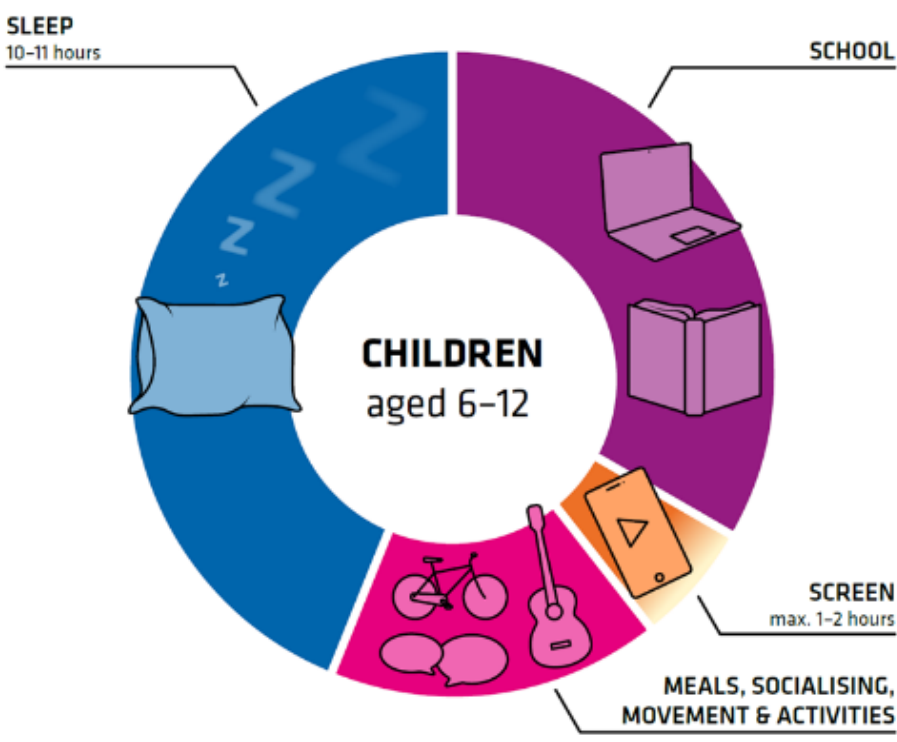
Next, **Idah Klint** from Mediemyndigheten (The Swedish Agency for the Media, part of the Swedish Safer Internet Centre) provided an overview of children and adolescent digital media use in Sweden. While there currently aren't any specific recommendations, it has been at the centre of public debate over the past year, with screen time being the most common cause of media-related conflicts in the family. Therefore, a government assignment is currently running (2023-2025) to explore the digital habits of young people.

During dialogues with young people, it emerged that they use the internet primarily to find information and learn new things, and they appreciate its fun, entertaining, and social nature. However, they are aware and concerned about disinformation, online hate and bullying, violent images, and its addictiveness. The general recommendation concerning the effects on sleep is not to use screens before

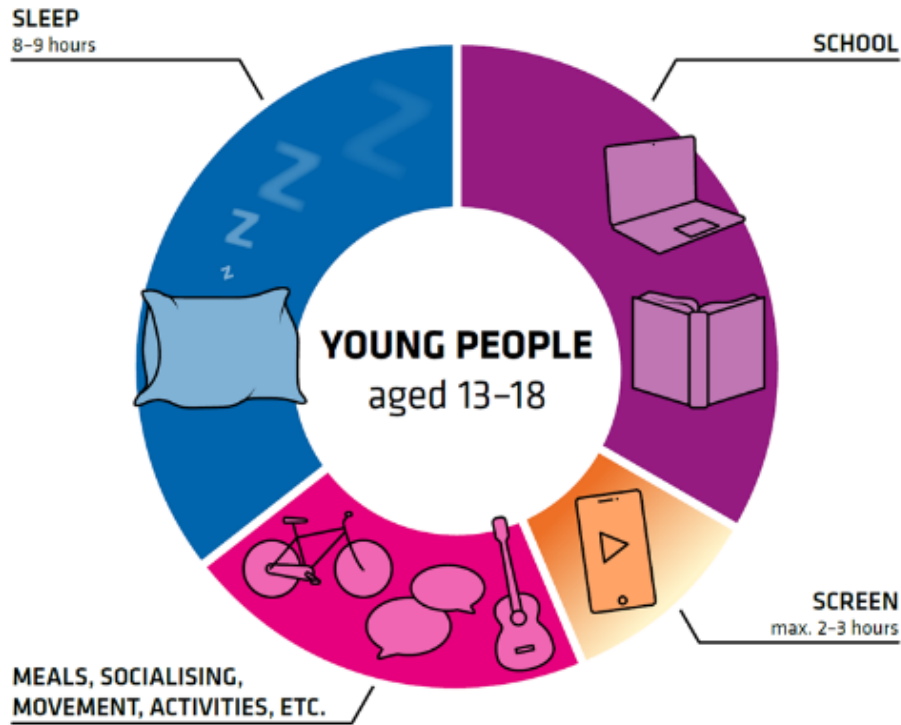
bedtime and to leave all devices outside the bedroom during the night. Specific recommendations were developed for various age ranges, as shown in the illustrations below:



Screentime recommendations for small children



Screentime recommendations for children



Screentime recommendations for young people

Children aged 2-5 should only have access to age-appropriate apps that do not contain ads or algorithms. For children aged 6-12, parents and guardians should follow the age limits that exist for video-sharing services, social media and games, and already start having conversations about their digital habits and online experiences. Adolescents aged 13-18 should reflect on their own digital habits, screen use and how it makes them feel, and try and keep a balance between schoolwork, sleep, social activities, and physical activities while contributing to a courteous online climate by maintaining a good tone towards others.

The formal presentations in this session concluded with an intervention from members of the Youth Advisory Group (SIF YAG), **Liise** (Estonia), **Diya** (Finland, and **Dónal** (Ireland) who provided an insight into the topic of screentime from the youth's point of view.

Screens have become an essential part of young people’s daily lives, helping them stay connected and cope with isolation. However, while technology provides them with valuable support, it also has negative effects, such as stress and unhealthy habits. The debate around screen time bans, such as Australia’s social media bill and Ireland’s proposed regulations, raises questions about the effectiveness and motivations of these approaches. While some view these measures as protective, others see them as oversimplified solutions to a complex issue. According to young people, the real problem isn't screen time itself, but instead what it is used for. During lockdown, for example, technology helped to maintain connections and support mental health, but excessive screen time can lead to issues like anxiety and sleep problems. Banning screens won’t address these risks; instead, education and support to help young people manage their screen time responsibly is crucial. Governments, schools, and parents should focus on teaching balance and prioritising well-being, enabling users to make better choices for a healthier digital world.

An interactive Mentimeter quiz was then used to explore the issue of screen time further with the session participants. One of the questions posed was should smartphones be banned in schools, with responses formed into a word cloud as follows:



Mentimeter quiz question: should smartphones be banned in schools?

Some debate followed, with many participants acknowledging that the age factor was an important part of the discussion: for example, a ban should not apply to all minors under 18 – age and other intersectional factors need to be taken into account. On the issue of who should be responsible for managing young people's screen time, again the responses were mixed:



Mentimeter quiz question: who should be responsible for managing young people's screen time?

To conclude the session, table discussions took place with participants identifying some key challenges on the topic of screentime, such as:

- The **complexity of regulation**, due also to age factors.
- The **difficulty in ensuring effective enforcement** across different platforms and regions, due also to different policy frameworks.

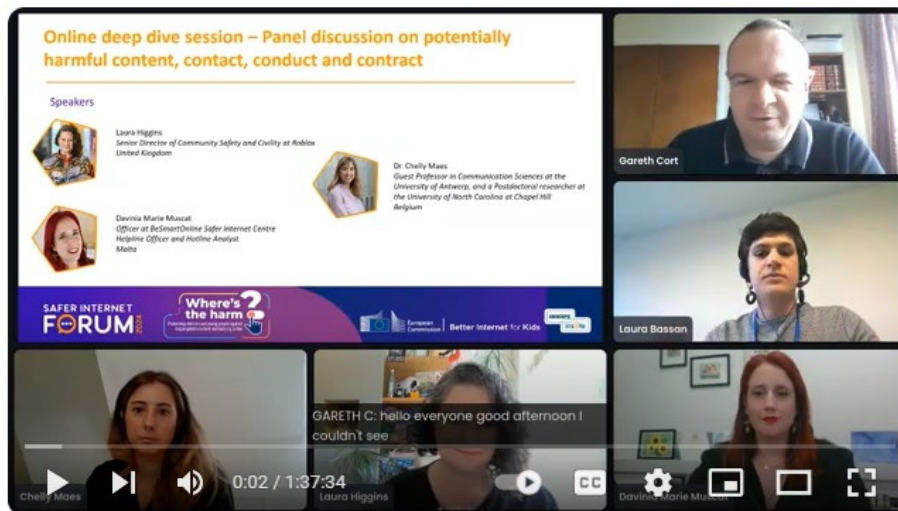
Key actions and solutions proposed included:

- Raising awareness, including **clearer and more comprehensive policies** and regulations.
- **Fostering cooperation among different stakeholders**, especially young people, when discussing policies that impact them the most.
- **Youth participation**, especially in policy-making.
- Enhanced **collaboration with tech companies** to implement more effective safeguards and controls

- Improved **educational programmes** on digital literacy.

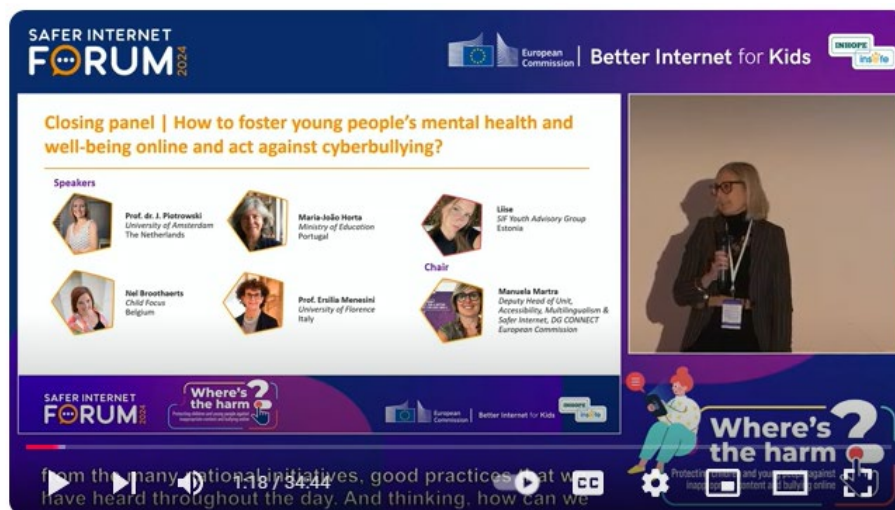
Online deep dive session

For those people participating in Safer Internet Forum 2024 online, a dedicated online deep dive session was provided. A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



Closing keynote and panel: How to foster children's and young people's mental health and well-being online and act against cyberbullying?

A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



Prof. dr. J. Piotrowski delivered the final keynote presentation on supporting a bright future for youth in a digital society. She pointed out that it is crucial to recognise that technologies, while problematic in some ways, are intentionally designed to engage users. This engagement is often achieved through mechanisms such as gamification, push notifications, personalised content, and dark patterns - all of which help form habits and keep users interacting with platforms, even if they want to put their devices down. Although Jessica acknowledged the negative aspects of technology use, she also highlighted its many positive impacts, such as strengthening friendships, supporting activism, and fostering identity formation. She emphasised the need for a balanced view, as the digital space can also help young people form connections and engage in positive learning experiences.

Results of a recent study on social media use and mental health among young people revealed nuanced outcomes. The study, conducted with 479 teenagers in the Netherlands, involved a 100-day digital diary documenting social media use and mental well-being. The results showed that 60 per cent of the participants experienced negative effects, particularly girls with low self-concept clarity. However, 25 per cent reported positive effects, with Snapchat and WhatsApp associated with improved friendship closeness and overall well-being, while platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube were linked to more negative mental health outcomes. Jessica stressed the importance of recognising these nuances, arguing against generalisations that all social media is harmful. She highlighted that ongoing research shows varied impacts depending on the platform, with some providing positive benefits to young people's social connections and mental health.

Young users are more susceptible to the influences of social media, leading to engagement by design tactics that are increasingly used to keep them hooked. Significantly, simple solutions like timers are ineffective and are not successful in reducing screen time. Features such as "focus mode", break times, and turning off notifications can potentially help, but all such solutions have their limitations.

Jessica then shifted focus to a fascinating new study involving the disengagement of social media feeds. A survey of 88 TikTok users over two weeks revealed that disengagement by design (in this case, turning off personalised feeds) led to a 40-minute reduction in daily screen time. This change resulted in lower time distortion, more control over usage, and less habitual interaction with the app. However, it also led to less meaningful content consumption, making users want to revert to the personalised feed once the study was over.

Further research into news consumption highlights the challenges faced by journalists and news agencies in ensuring a diverse range of content is presented. The potential for a more nuanced approach involving multiple versions of content feeds was raised. This can enhance digital literacy and allow for diversity by design, ensuring that users are exposed to different perspectives.

Jessica also discussed the importance of involving various stakeholders - parents, young people, and media developers - in conversations about social media and online gaming. The need for a middle ground between user-centric design and the realities of the industry was emphasised. As an illustration, Jessica referenced her work with YouTube Kids, where high-quality principles are used to promote good content and demote harmful content, demonstrating the positive impact when certain entities take responsibility.

Another key issue is the struggle to balance personalisation with user autonomy. Platforms like Instagram are attempting to reset recommendations, but these efforts often fall short due to poor design and lack of visibility.

The keynote concluded with a call to better support parents and caregivers, while also ensuring that youth are central to the conversations about online safety. Jessica touched upon the decline in sleep among teens, which is widely contributed to digital engagement. Research has shown that teens in the Netherlands are getting an hour less sleep per night compared to a decade ago, but screens are just one factor in this complex issue.

Furthermore, AI literacy was highlighted as essential for young people. Understanding how AI works can lead to more informed choices, making it critical to invest in AI competence from an early age. There is a need for continued collaborative research and the establishment of ethical frameworks to guide future developments in technology.

In conclusion, while banning or overly simplifying solutions isn't the answer, fostering digital literacy, AI competence, and a thoughtful dialogue between stakeholders can help mitigate the negative impacts of online gaming and social media.

The ensuing panel discussion posed various questions:

How can we foster young people's mental health and well-being online while tackling cyberbullying?

In Italy, legislation passed in 2017 was the first in Europe to address cyberbullying in schools. Every school must now have a teacher and a policy for handling cyberbullying. Over 20,000 teachers have been trained via an e-learning platform, in collaboration with Italy's Safer Internet Centre.

What is the approach in Portugal to support mental health and online well-being in schools?

The approach in Portugal focuses on involving both students and faculty in the process. Teachers aim to engage students actively, making disengagement uncomfortable. Schools are being reimagined to cater not only to academic needs but also to support mental health and well-being. The collaboration between schools, students, and stakeholders is key to ensuring that digital well-being is integrated into school agendas.

What can be done next to address reporting challenges, especially given reporting fatigue among young people?

Reporting fatigue is a significant issue. Young people often feel discouraged from reporting because they believe nothing will be done. A blended approach to helplines and hotlines is needed across Europe to support young people more effectively. While the Digital Services Act (DSA) is a helpful framework, it doesn't apply to all types of communication, which creates gaps. A stronger commitment to supporting young people is essential.

Are schools doing enough to address mental health and cyberbullying?

The answer was mixed. Some schools are stepping up, but many are doing so reactively rather than proactively. The panel emphasised that mental health and digital well-being must be treated with the same priority as academic success. Digital education should be a continuous, evolving process, not a one-time initiative. Additionally, there was support for empowering students to use AI positively, rather than banning smartphones outright.

Looking to the future, what have we learned after so many Safer Internet Forums (SIFs)?

While much has been learned, there is still more to understand. Research continues to play a pivotal role in uncovering the dynamics at play within social media and digital platforms. The panel stressed the importance of active student participation in decision-making processes and the need to approach the issue with nuance, as it involves many different actors.

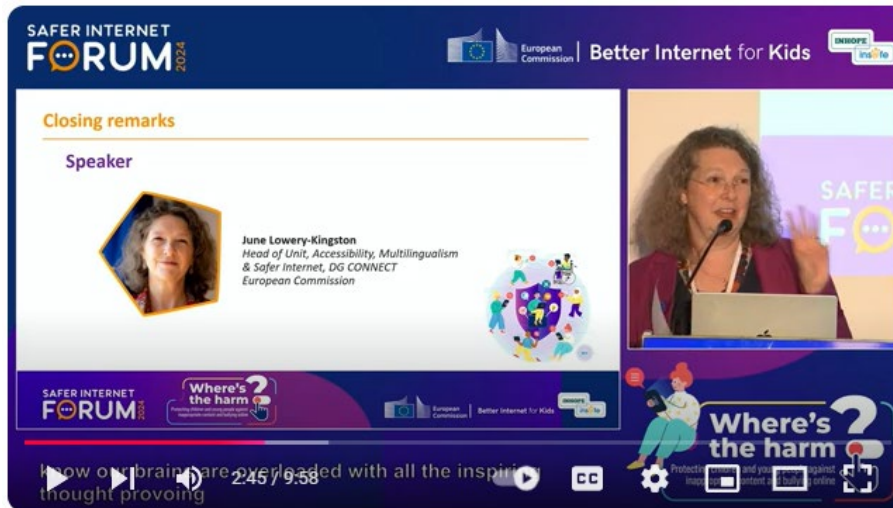
What's next in terms of fostering online skills for young people?

A key takeaway was the importance of developing online skills. The BIK Youth panellist suggested that future sessions should focus on fostering these skills, which is considered to be a crucial step moving forward.



Closing remarks

A recording of this session is available (click on the image to play the video):



June Lowery-Kingston (Head of Unit, Accessibility, Multilingualism and Safer Internet, DG CONNECT, European Commission) gave her final address at the Safer Internet Forum, where she was honoured by the SIF YAG members and the audience with a standing ovation.

In closing the Forum, June introduced the [new Better Internet for Kids platform](#) and announced a new help and reporting page available in all 24 EU languages. In doing so, June emphasised that access to help on online safety issues shouldn't be dependent on proficiency in English.

June also introduced Ally, the new mascot co-designed by BIK Youth, and shared her excitement for the upcoming [Safer Internet Day celebrations](#), taking place across the globe in February 2025.

Annex 1: The SIF Youth Advisory Group 2024

Following the successful work of the Safer Internet Forum Youth Advisory Group (SIF YAG) in SIF 2022 and SIF 2023 in leading the events in a youth-centred manner, it was decided to establish a new SIF YAG formed of different young people to support the organisation of SIF 2024. The SIF edition 2024 was once again youth-led with a focus on pillar one of the BIK+ strategy on safe digital experiences and how to protect children and young people against inappropriate content and bullying online.

To provide a fair and equal opportunity, EUN called for expressions of interest for young people to be part of the SIF YAG. The call was made available to all young people who are currently part of the BIK Youth Ambassador programme within EU-funded Safer Internet Centres. While a total of 17 applications were received, after a thorough selection process exploring the young people's motivation, alongside considerations such as gender, age and geographical balance, a group of six SIF YAG members was formed with representatives from Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Italy and Portugal, all aged between 16 and 19 years old.

Starting in July 2024, the six SIF YAG members joined with the BIK Coordination Team for nine online preparatory meetings leading up to SIF 2024. During these meetings, the SIF YAG contributed to the creation of the event from its inception (by voicing their opinions and recommendations on the title), and developing the agenda, including the structure of the interventions within the various sessions. As the agenda was shaped, the SIF YAG also decided on their own roles as moderators and co-hosts during SIF 2024 and worked in pairs or individually to adapt their sessions with their inputs and questions.

Moreover, SIF YAG members were involved in facilitating two out of the seven deep dive sessions at the SIF, with a particular focus on cyberbullying and screen time.

For this, they worked in groups of three, bringing in their own experiences on the topics while preparing interactive ways to engage the audience in their intervention.

The SIF YAG meetings took place alongside the BIK Youth Panel meetings (see also [Annex 2](#)), and they were progressively updated on each other's plans. The two groups of youngsters finally met in Brussels, two days before SIF, to work together to align their interventions and prepare and rehearse the final details for the event.

During the preparatory days, the groups brainstormed together on the different topics related to the main focus of the event (how to protect young people from digital harms) and prepared their sessions based on these inputs. Finally, both groups, along with the members of the BIK Coordination Team, used this time to rehearse the full extent of the SIF to ensure the smooth running of the main event. Some of the SIF YAG also met with the panellists and representatives from the European Commission during the preparatory days to discuss their roles and responsibilities, the progress they have made, and their ideas for chairing their sessions.

Besides the main event, one SIF YAG member (Vincent from Croatia) also participated in a BIK Advisory Board meeting, together with another BIK Youth Panellist (Sofia from Austria) the day before SIF. During this high-level meeting, different stakeholders discussed the Better Internet for Kids project, sharing their views and priorities, including the enforcement of the Digital Service Act (DSA) and the [new BIK platform](#). Vincent and Sofia had the opportunity to contribute to the conversation about the possible future actions the BIK initiative should pursue and how to better involve young people in decision-making processes.



Dónal (Ireland) and Sanya (Italy) opening SIF 2024

SIF YAG members not only hosted all the sessions at SIF 2024 and presented in two of the deep-dive discussions, but also opened and closed the event and chaired important high-level panels, such as the plenary discussion with Renate Nikolay (Deputy Director General, DG CONNECT, European Commission), Evin Incir (Member of the European Parliament), Karen McAuley (Coimisiún na Meán), Justine Atlan (Association e-Enfance/3018) and Constantin Gissler (DOT Europe).



João (Portugal) and Diya (Finland) chaired the high-level panel

Moreover, Liise (Estonia) participated in the high-level closing panel together with Prof. dr. Jessica Piotrowski (University of Amsterdam), Nel Broothaerts (Child Focus, Belgium), Maria João Horta (Ministry of Education, Portugal), and Professor Ersilia Menesini (University of Florence, Italy).

For more information about the SIF YAG please visit [the dedicated page on the BIK platform](#).

Annex 2: The BIK Youth Panel and International Youth Panel 2024

In the context of the annual Safer Internet Forum (SIF) organised as part of the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) project, a BIK Youth Panel is convened to empower a group of young people to delve deeper into contemporary trends and issues related to online safety, voice their opinions and views on such topics, and represent their peers on a European scale. These BIK Youth Panellists are often engaged in various other activities at both national and European level, and a considerable number transition into the role of BIK Youth Ambassadors.

In the 2024 edition of the Safer Internet Forum, in addition to the BIK Youth Panel formed of youth representatives from EU co-funded Safer Internet Centres, a new International Youth Panel was convened, including young people from Armenia, Brazil, Ghana, Ukraine, and Turkey (all representing the SIC+ programme), along with youth from Malta and the UK. Additionally, five young people from Australia collaborated remotely with the BIK Youth Panel and joined the SIF online.

In addition to a pre-summer icebreaker meeting in June 2024, preparatory activities with the BIK Youth Panel included eight weekly online meetings from September up until the week before SIF.

Overall, 37 young people aged 12-19 years old from 27 countries (including those from the International Youth Panel) took part in the BIK Youth activities linked with SIF 2024. During the online preparatory sessions in the months preceding SIF, the young people got acquainted with topics related to internet safety and privacy, determined the focus topics and key messages for their youth-led workshops, and devised a dramatic intervention for the plenary session.

As was the case in previous years, 'theme nights' helped to make the online preparatory meetings a fun and enjoyable experience, while creating a relaxed work environment for the young people. During these nights, everybody dressed or presented items based on a pre-selected theme. These ranged from Halloween

costumes to animals, favourite books and movies, to national food and dishes, or favourite hats as seen below.



The BIK Youth Panel 2024 attended numerous online preparatory meetings

Following the online preparatory meetings, the young people gathered in Brussels two days before the SIF event, between 19-20 November 2024, to fine-tune their workshop presentations and the plenary performance.

Due to the youth-led nature of the Forum, the young people had a significant role in both the planning and delivery of the event. With guidance from privacy expert Chris Pinchen and Austrian Safer Internet Centre Youth Coordinator Barbara Buchegger, the BIK Youth Panellists designed five workshops focusing on cyberbullying and hate online, pornography and sexualisation of the internet, misinformation, toxic masculinity/femininity and body image, and internet addiction. Through these interventions, they highlighted the various risks that young people faced online to the gathered audience, alongside strategies to empower young people against these threats.



BIK Youth Panellists 2024 during the plenary intervention



Youth-led workshop on cyberbullying

In addition to designing their youth-led workshops and the plenary intervention, the BIK Youth Panel have also worked alongside the members of the SIF YAG to achieve cohesion between their respective preparations as outlined in [Annex 1](#) above.

At the end of the SIF event, all youth participants received a certificate in appreciation of their efforts.



Youth participants with their certificates

For more information about the BIK Youth Panel, please visit the [dedicated page](#) on the BIK platform.



Safer Internet Day 2025

Tuesday
11 February

Together for a better internet

better-internet-for-kids.europa.eu/saferinternetday



#SID2025

