

(dis)connected REALITIES

RESEARCH REPORT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of the research phase conducted within the Erasmus+ project (Dis)Connected Realities (2023-3-PT02-KA210-YOU-000179100), implemented by Escola Técnica Profissional da Moita (Portugal), Asociación MIRAS (Spain) and Asociación Albores (Spain).

The study aimed to explore current practices, needs and challenges related to the use of social media and its impact on young people's well-being, as well as the role of youth workers in addressing online risks and promoting safer digital environments. Between October 2024 and November 2024, 106 professionals working with young people from more than 20 countries responded to an online survey, providing a diverse cross-European perspective.

Key Findings

- Social media plays a central role in the daily lives of young people, significantly influencing their emotional well-being, identity construction and social relationships.
- Most professionals actively use social media to communicate with young people; however, there are still differences in frequency and confidence in its use, revealing gaps in digital competences.
- Youth workers report increasing concerns about the negative impact of social media, including anxiety, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, digital addiction and exposure to harmful content.
- There is a clear need for practical tools and methodologies to address topics such as online risks, digital identity, privacy and emotional well-being in youth work.
- Many professionals feel insufficiently prepared to deal with emerging digital challenges, particularly those related to online violence, manipulation, addictive platform dynamics and new digital threats.

Strategic Relevance

The findings underline the urgent need to strengthen digital literacy, critical thinking and preventive approaches within youth work.

They also highlight the importance of equipping professionals with practical, accessible and evidence-based resources to better support young people in navigating the digital environment safely and responsibly.

These insights directly informed the development of the project's main output, "The New Playground: A Guide to Play Safe", a practical manual providing tools, strategies and awareness-raising activities to support professionals working with young people in the digital age.

About this report

This document presents the results of the research phase carried out within the European project (Dis)Connected Realities, reference: 2023-3-PT02-KA210-YOU-000179100.

The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of social media on young people, with a particular focus on digital well-being, online risks and the challenges faced by professionals working with youth in the current digital environment. The study also aimed to identify existing gaps in knowledge, tools and methodologies needed to effectively address these issues in youth work practice.

(Dis)Connected Realities is a European cooperation project developed by a partnership of organisations from Portugal and Spain: Escola Técnica Profissional da Moita (Portugal), Asociación MIRAS (Spain) and Asociación Albores (Spain). The project brings together expertise from the fields of youth work, education and social intervention, with the aim of promoting a safer, more conscious and balanced use of social media among young people.

The research phase represents the starting point of the project and provided the foundation for the development of its main outputs. Data were collected through an anonymous online questionnaire completed by 106 professionals working with young people across more than 20 countries, ensuring a diverse European perspective.

The findings of this research directly informed the design and development of the project's main result, the manual "The New Playground: A Guide to Play Safe", which focuses on digital well-being, prevention of online risks and practical strategies for professionals working with young people.

This report is intended for youth workers, educators, social professionals and organisations working with young people, as well as for policymakers and stakeholders interested in digital well-being, online safety and the impact of social media on youth.

All materials produced within the project, including this report and the project manual, are available free of charge on the project website:

<https://www.thenewplayground.eu>



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METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was designed as an exploratory and descriptive survey aimed at identifying current practices, needs, challenges and priorities related to the use of social media and its impact on young people, particularly in terms of digital well-being, online risks and professional intervention in youth work.

The research forms part of the initial needs analysis phase of the (Dis)Connected Realities project. Given the objective of mapping perceptions and self-reported practices across different European contexts, a quantitative approach based primarily on structured survey questions was adopted, complemented by qualitative insights from open-ended responses.

Sampling and Participants

The survey was distributed online through the partner organisations' networks, mailing lists and social media channels. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

A total of 106 valid responses were collected between October 2024 and November 2024. Respondents included youth workers, educators and professionals working with young people across more than 20 countries, ensuring a diverse European perspective. The sample reflects a variety of professional profiles, organisational contexts and levels of experience in working with young people in digital environments.

The sampling method can be described as non-probability convenience sampling, as participants self-selected to respond based on their interest and availability.

Therefore, the results should be interpreted as indicative of trends within the sector rather than statistically representative of all youth work professionals in Europe.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through an online questionnaire created using a digital survey tool. The questionnaire included multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale rating questions, closed questions with predefined categories and open-ended questions to gather qualitative insights. The survey explored areas such as the use of social media in professional practice, communication with young people, perceived impact of social media on mental health and well-being, identification of online risks, level of preparedness of professionals to address digital challenges, and training needs in the field of digital well-being and online safety.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, focusing on frequencies and percentages in order to identify patterns and trends. Visual representations, such as charts and graphs, were used to enhance clarity and accessibility of the findings. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were reviewed and grouped into thematic categories. Recurring themes were identified and synthesised to complement and contextualise the quantitative results.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. No personal identifying data were collected. The research was conducted for educational and developmental purposes within the framework of the (Dis)Connected Realities project. The data were used exclusively to inform the design and development of project activities and outputs.

RESULTS

- 1. Use of Social Media in Youth Work**
- 2. Perceived Impact of Social Media on Young People**
- 3. Risks and Challenges in the Digital Environment**
- 4. Professional Preparedness and Competences**
- 5. Training Needs and Support**

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUTH WORK

The findings show that social media is widely integrated into the daily professional practice of those working with young people. It is commonly used as a tool for communication, information sharing and engagement with users.

A majority of respondents report using social media on a regular basis. Specifically, 43.4% of participants indicated that they use social media frequently, while 21.7% reported always using it. Additionally, 25.5% stated that they use it sometimes. In contrast, a smaller proportion reported rarely (4.7%) or never (8.5%) using social media in their professional practice.

Overall, these results indicate that 65.1% of respondents use social media frequently or always, confirming its central role as a communication channel in youth work. However, the presence of professionals who use it only occasionally or not at all highlights existing disparities in digital engagement and practices.

This suggests that while social media is widely recognised as an essential tool for reaching young people, not all professionals feel equally confident or equipped to integrate it into their work. This gap points to the need for further support, training and practical guidance.

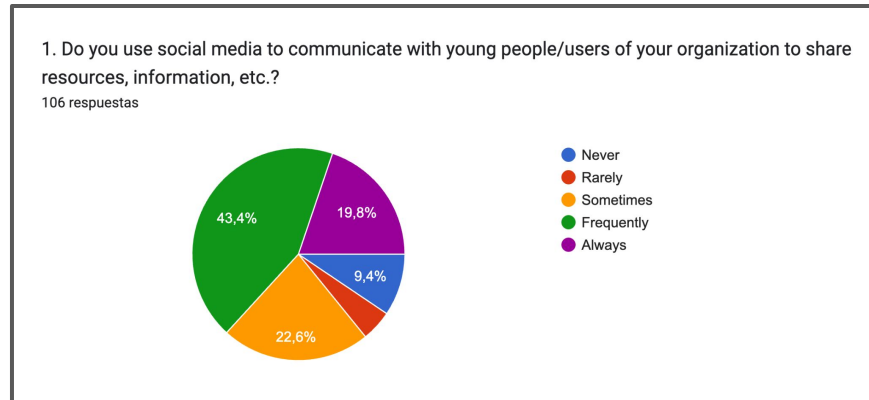


Figure 1. Use of social media for communication with young people

THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUNG PEOPLE

The results indicate that professionals perceive social media as having a strong and complex impact on young people. It is recognised as a central element in their daily lives, influencing how they communicate, construct their identity and relate to others.

At the same time, respondents express significant concern about its effects on emotional well-being. Social media is frequently associated with increased levels of anxiety, low self-esteem and emotional vulnerability, particularly among adolescents.

Professionals also highlight the role of social media in shaping unrealistic expectations, promoting constant comparison and reinforcing the need for validation through likes and interactions. These dynamics are perceived as contributing to psychological pressure and reduced self-confidence among young people.

Despite these concerns, social media is not viewed exclusively as negative. It is also recognised as a space for expression, connection and access to information. However, the balance between positive and negative impact appears to depend largely on how young people use these platforms and the level of guidance they receive.

These findings underline the importance of supporting young people in developing a critical and conscious use of social media, as well as the need for professionals to address its emotional and psychological implications in their work.

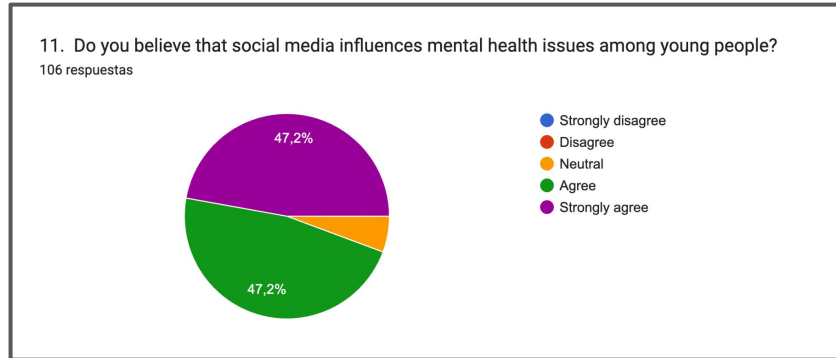


Figure 2. Perceived impact of social media on young people

RISKS AND CHALLENGES IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The findings highlight a wide range of risks and challenges associated with young people's use of social media, particularly in relation to their mental health and overall well-being. Professionals consistently identify digital environments as spaces where multiple vulnerabilities can emerge and intensify.

Among the most significant risks identified are anxiety and depression, low self-esteem linked to comparison, cyberbullying and digital addiction. These factors are perceived as highly relevant and interconnected, often reinforcing each other and contributing to negative emotional and behavioural outcomes among young people.

In addition, respondents point to other important challenges such as the impact of social media on sleep habits, the need for constant approval and validation, and the potential deterioration of social skills. These elements reflect how digital environments can influence not only psychological well-being, but also daily routines and interpersonal development.

The results also suggest that some aspects of social media, such as emotional support, creativity and self-expression, may be perceived in a more nuanced way. While they can offer positive opportunities, they may also involve risks depending on the context and intensity of use.

Overall, the data show that professionals perceive social media as a complex environment where both risks and opportunities coexist. However, the prevalence and intensity of the identified risks underline the need for preventive strategies and early intervention approaches.

These findings highlight the importance of equipping professionals with the tools and knowledge necessary to identify, understand and address these risks in a comprehensive and effective way.

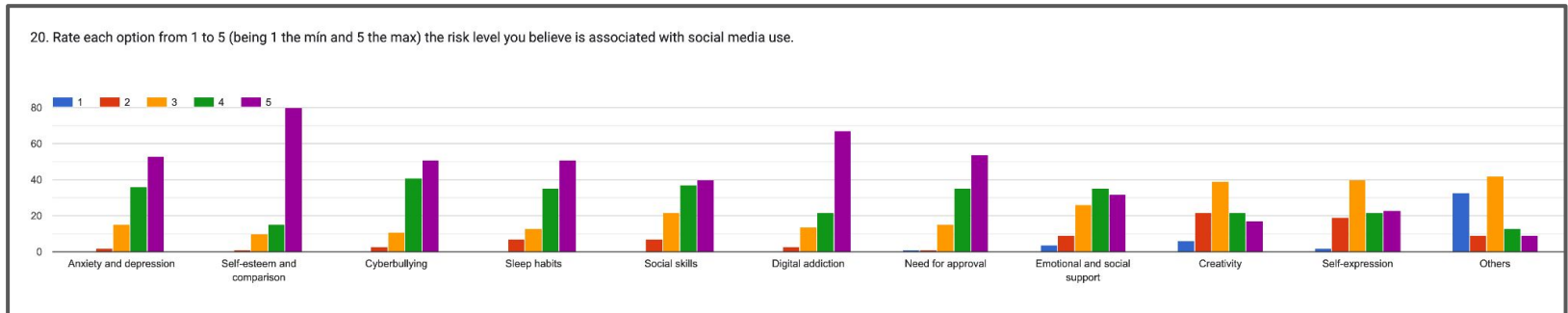


Figure 3. Perceived risk levels associated with social media use

PROFESSIONAL PREPAREDNESS AND COMPETENCES

The findings reveal that, although professionals are aware of the risks associated with social media, many do not feel fully prepared to address these challenges in their work with young people. This highlights a gap between the recognition of the problem and the capacity to respond effectively.

A significant proportion of respondents indicate that they do not feel sufficiently equipped to help young people prevent or manage the risks related to social media use. This lack of preparedness suggests the need for stronger support systems, clearer guidelines and more structured approaches within youth work practice.

In addition, the results show that not all professionals are currently using tools or techniques to promote the responsible use of social media. While some have already integrated preventive strategies into their work, others may lack the resources, training or confidence to do so.

This situation reflects the fast-paced evolution of digital environments, where professionals are required to respond to increasingly complex issues such as cyberbullying, digital addiction and the emotional impact of online interactions. In many cases, young people are perceived as more familiar with digital platforms than the professionals supporting them, which can create an imbalance in knowledge and control.

These findings underline the importance of strengthening professional competences not only in terms of digital literacy, but also in understanding the psychological and social dimensions of social media use. Supporting professionals in this area is essential to ensure effective prevention, guidance and intervention.

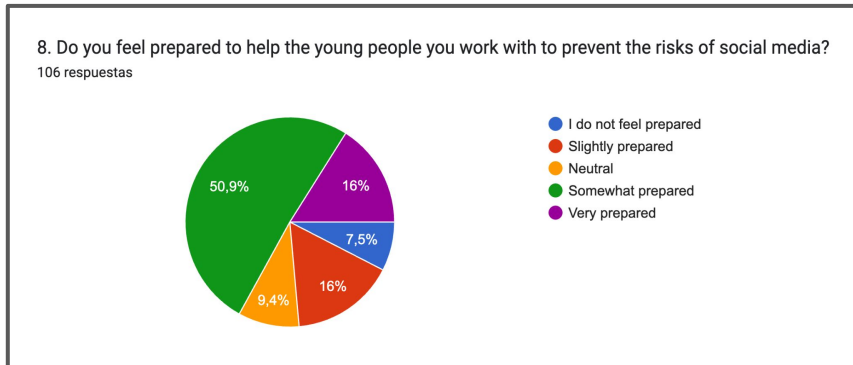


Figure 4. Level of preparedness of professionals to address social media risks

TRAINING NEEDS AND SUPPORT

The findings clearly indicate a strong demand for training and support among professionals working with young people in relation to social media and its impact on mental health. Respondents express a clear need for practical resources, guidance and tools that can help them address digital challenges more effectively in their daily work.

A large proportion of participants expressed interest in receiving additional training on the use of social media and its impact on young people's mental health. This reflects both a growing awareness of the importance of the topic and a recognition of existing gaps in knowledge and competences.

Qualitative responses provide further insight into these needs. Participants highlighted the importance of acquiring practical strategies to prevent online risks, as well as tools to promote responsible and conscious use of social media among young people. Many respondents also emphasised the need for guidance on how to address issues such as cyberbullying, digital addiction and the emotional impact of social media.

In addition, professionals expressed a preference for practical, ready-to-use materials that can be easily implemented in real working contexts. There is a clear demand for applied knowledge that goes beyond theoretical frameworks and offers concrete solutions.

Furthermore, the need for continuous training opportunities was repeatedly mentioned, reflecting the fast-changing nature of digital environments and the difficulty of keeping up with emerging trends and risks.

Overall, the results confirm a significant gap between the challenges professionals face and the resources currently available to them. Addressing this gap is essential to strengthen the capacity of youth workers to support young people in navigating digital environments in a safe, critical and balanced way.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research confirm that social media plays a central role in the lives of young people and has a significant impact on their mental health, behaviour and social relationships. Professionals working with youth widely recognise both the opportunities and the risks associated with digital environments, highlighting the need for a balanced and informed approach.

The results reveal a clear gap between the increasing complexity of social media challenges and the level of preparedness of professionals to address them effectively. While social media is frequently used as a communication tool in youth work, its integration into structured educational and preventive practices remains uneven.

In particular, the research highlights growing concerns related to anxiety, low self-esteem, cyberbullying, digital addiction and the influence of online dynamics on young people's emotional well-being. These challenges are perceived as interconnected and require comprehensive responses that go beyond isolated interventions.

At the same time, the findings show a strong demand for training, practical tools and accessible resources that can support professionals in their daily work. Youth workers express the need for concrete strategies, methodologies and materials that can be directly applied in real contexts, as well as opportunities for continuous professional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, several key recommendations can be identified. First, it is essential to strengthen digital literacy and critical thinking among young people, enabling them to navigate online environments in a more conscious and responsible way.

Second, professionals should be supported through targeted training programmes that address both the technical and the psychosocial dimensions of social media use. This includes not only understanding digital tools, but also recognising their impact on emotional well-being and behaviour.

In addition, there is a need to develop practical and user-friendly resources that facilitate prevention and intervention in areas such as online risks, emotional well-being and responsible digital behaviour. These resources should be adaptable to different contexts and accessible to a wide range of professionals.

Finally, promoting a holistic approach that integrates digital well-being into youth work practices is crucial. Social media should not be treated as a separate issue, but as an integral part of young people's lives that requires continuous attention, reflection and action.

The results of this research have directly informed the development of the project's main output, "The New Playground: A Guide to Play Safe", which aims to respond to these identified needs by providing practical tools, strategies and awareness-raising activities for professionals working with young people.

Disclaimer

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The content of this document reflects the views of the authors only, and the European Union and the National Agency cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.

The results presented in this document are based on the research activities carried out within the project and aim to provide insights into the needs, challenges and perspectives related to digital tools, social media and artificial intelligence in youth work. The findings should be interpreted as indicative and contextual, and not as universally applicable conclusions.

This document is intended for informational and educational purposes, particularly for youth organisations, youth workers and professionals working with young people. It does not constitute legal, technical or professional advice.



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