



GALMUN 2026

SAINT JOSEPH SEMINARY AND HIGH SCHOOL
in partnership with
RETORIKA FOR MULTICULTURALISM



UNICEF *RESEARCH REPORT*

Digital Exploitation: Addressing the Victimization of
Children by Social Media Companies.

Definitions

Digital Platforms: Business models that use online infrastructure to facilitate interactions between groups.¹

Rabbit-hole Effect: Refers to when a user views harmful content and then is recommended more of the extreme versions of similar content by the algorithm.²

Algorithm: A sequence of instructions that a computer must perform to solve a well-defined problem.³

Artificial Intelligence: Computer systems that can perform complex tasks normally by human reasoning, decision making, creating, etc.⁴

AI Revolution: The recent development in AI technology that has become an essential tool used in many fields.⁵

Background

In the last decade, the digital environment has become a part of children's daily life where most of their time is spent on the media such as television, digital platforms including streaming services, gaming environments and most influentially social media. These platforms offer many opportunities to learn, play, explore and interact with others, but they also have a lot of side effects on children's mental health, privacy and development.⁶ The contribution of AI (Artificial intelligence) into the digital system, it exaggerates these challenges and raises urgent questions about safety and human rights.⁷ The debate in our committee should focus specifically on malpractices performed by Social Media and AI-based companies that lead to the exploitation of children: the collection and utilization of social media data, maintaining knowledge of the negative aspects of Social Media on the mental and physical health of children and the development of highly advanced AI based algorithms that formulates the minor's Social Media feed such that it causes addiction exposure to highly harmful materials. In all of these cases, the Social Media companies are exploiting children to generate income, not considering the harmful consequences.

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, X and many more have sophisticated algorithm systems designed to display content based on user interests. It works by collecting considerable amounts of personal data including search history, likes, comments, location and viewing time. Then they use this data to create personalized content designed to keep users for as long as possible online to earn more money. Unfortunately for children this will make them become more exposed to the media where they lose their self

¹ Kate Gibson, "Digital Platforms: What they are & how they create value" Harvard Business School, May 2024 <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/what-is-a-digital-platform>

² Liana Walker "The EU says Instagram and FaceBook may be too addictive for children in fresh investigation, here's what we know" abc news, May 2024 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-17/eu-says-instagram-and-facebook-are-too-addictive-in-probe/103859680>

³ Kassiani Nikolopoulou, "What is an Algorithm | Definitions & Examples" scribbr, August 2023 <https://www.scribbr.com/ai-tools/what-is-an-algorithm/>

⁴ "What is Artificial Intelligence?" NASA <https://www.nasa.gov/what-is-artificial-intelligence/>

⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2020/08/10/what-is-the-artificial-intelligence-revolution-and-why-does-it-matter-to-your-business/>

⁶ "Child and Youth Safety Online" United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/child-and-youth-safety-online>

⁷ "Beyond algorithms : Three signals of changing AI -child interaction" unicef, 23 May 2025. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/stories/beyond-algorithms-three-signals-changing-ai-child-interaction>

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control and become more addicted to social media at such a young age when their emotional systems are still developing. Many children experience anxiety, depression and lack of self confidence through the content that is suggested by the algorithm systems, which also affects the way they behave, feel, and understand the world.⁸ All of these algorithms have become more developed with the recent technological strides made in the field of AI.

The rise of the algorithm systems in social media platforms also facilitated new forms of digital exploitation by exposing children to harmful and inappropriate content, and encouraging compulsive behavior such as pulling hair, biting nails, or compulsively peeling the skin. In addition, algorithmic systems can unintentionally encourage children towards harmful online content such as pro-eating disorder groups, self-harm and risky behaviors.

Legally, for children under the age of thirteen there are restrictions that limit the type of data that platforms are allowed to collect without consent. Many platforms, including social media, collect large amounts of user data. This data can include personally identifiable information, device location, browsing and download history, financial details, and device IDs. After collecting this information, these platforms are technically capable of selling it directly to other platforms or to third-party companies. This data can be used to control what children see online, putting them in danger and making them more vulnerable to exploitation.⁹ There are several notable examples of companies facing investigations due to mishandling children's data, and Meta is one of them. Regulators and advocacy groups accuse Meta of collecting large amounts of data from their young users including browsing history, device location and personal identifying data and then using or selling it to other platforms or to third party companies. These concerns have led the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) in 2023 to propose a ban on Meta exploiting the data of minors.¹⁰

⁸ Ben Gillenwater "How Social Media Algorithms Harm Kids: Parent Protection Guide" Family IT Guy , 10 July 2024. <https://www.familyitguy.com/algorithm-trap.html>

⁹ "What Data Do Plat-forms Collect?" Children and screens , July 2025. <https://www.childrenandscreens.org/learn-explore/research/what-data-do-platforms-collect/>

¹⁰ " FTC Proposes Blanket Prohibition Preventing Facebook from Monetizing Youth Data " FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION, May 2023 <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2023/05/ftc-proposes-blanket-prohibition-preventing-facebook-monetizing-youth-data>

Treaties and organizations

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - 1989

A UN treaty that gives rights to every child in the world. It obligates governments to give and protect children's rights. It establishes that children have the right to safety, privacy, and protection from sexual exploitation.¹¹

Digital Fairness Act – 2024

Law passed by the European Union that aims to “tackle unethical techniques and commercial practices related to dark patterns, marketing by social media influencers, the addictive design of digital products and online profiling especially when consumer vulnerabilities are exploited for commercial purposes”.¹²

NetChoice, LLC v. Paxton (2024)

A US Supreme court ruling limited the ability of the US government to regulate Social Media Algorithms. This is due to considerations based on the First Amendment that protects Freedom of Speech.¹³

Provisions on Administration of Algorithmic Recommendation for Internet Information Service (2022)

Law passed by China that aims at regulating algorithm-based suggestions and recommendations to prevent exploitation.¹⁴

Current Situation

Social Media is a very recent phenomenon, and consequently it is only in the last few years that the serious negative effects of Social Media have been brought to the forefront of national debate in many countries. Already in 2021, Frances Haugen, a former data scientist at Meta (the parent company of Instagram and Facebook) released thousands of documents revealing the company's awareness of its harmful impact on young users. Haugen has leaked lots of Meta studies that showed how Instagram was harming teenagers, especially young girls, by increasing suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, and body image issues. Despite knowing the risks, Meta continued to maximize its growth and profit rather than implementing safeguards on its platforms. By these documents Frances Haugen has shown the world how social media algorithms are programmed to prioritize profits over safety and wellbeing of minors.¹⁵

The recent AI revolution has merely exacerbated the issue. China was the first to pass regulation regarding the matter in 2022 when they passed the Provisions on Administration of Algorithmic Recommendation for Internet Information Service. The EU (European Union) launched investigations in 2024 into major social media companies including TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook (Meta) over online content and child safeguarding.¹⁶ These inquiries examine whether the platforms business models place minors at risk of child exploitation, exposure to harmful materials and mental health consequences. The EU main

¹¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) 35th Anniversary <https://research.un.org/en/crc35>

¹² <https://www.digital-fairness-act.com/>

¹³ <https://nysba.org/u-s-supreme-court-suspicious-of-state-social-media-regulation/?srsltid=AfmBOOrOr9adBMNLTAQwnVPyVOvZTOHUzcjeMid4816jHRYU1judE5>
¹⁴ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/19904.pdf>

¹⁵ Bobby Allyn “Here are 4 key points from the Facebook whistleblower’s testimony on Capitol Hill” NPR, October 2021 <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/05/1043377310/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-congress>

¹⁶ Mr Breton , European Parliament , May 2024 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2024-000983-ASW_EN.html

concerns are about the algorithms simulating behavioral addictions in children creating the “rabbit-hole effect,” and misuse of children’s data.¹⁷ The EU then passed the Digital Fairness Act (2024) that aimed at protecting vulnerable children from malpractices by Social Media companies. Other countries also have acted, with Australia passing a law prohibiting 16 year olds from owning social media accounts.¹⁸ While we have seen some countries and actors take certain steps to combating the issue, the international community is far away from formulating a comprehensive framework to regulate social media, especially because of the rapid technological development that is seen in Social Media and AI based technology.

Timeline:

- 2004 - Facebook was established by a group of students in Harvard University.
- 2005 - Youtube was launched.
- 2006 – Twitter was rebranded.
- 2006 - Facebook introduced Algorithms into its News Feed.
- 2016 – Instagram began introducing the news feed feature which presented content based on a complicated set of factors
- 2017 - Facebook began introducing AI machine learning into its operations.
- 2022 - China passes the Provisions on Administration of Algorithmic Recommendation for Internet Information Service.
- 2024 – EU passes the Digital Fairness Act

¹⁷ Liana Walker “ The EU says Instagram and FaceBook may be too addictive for children in fresh investigation, here's what we know “ abc news, May 2024 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-17/eu-says-instagram-and-facebook-are-too-addictive-in-probe/103859680>

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp341gz24p5o>

Questions to consider:

Is your country home to major tech companies that profit from algorithms?

Does your country economically rely on social media companies?

What specific actions is your country taking to prevent media platforms from exploiting children?

Does your country engage in international frameworks in order to prevent children from getting exploited by social media companies and algorithms?

Are children in your country at higher risk?

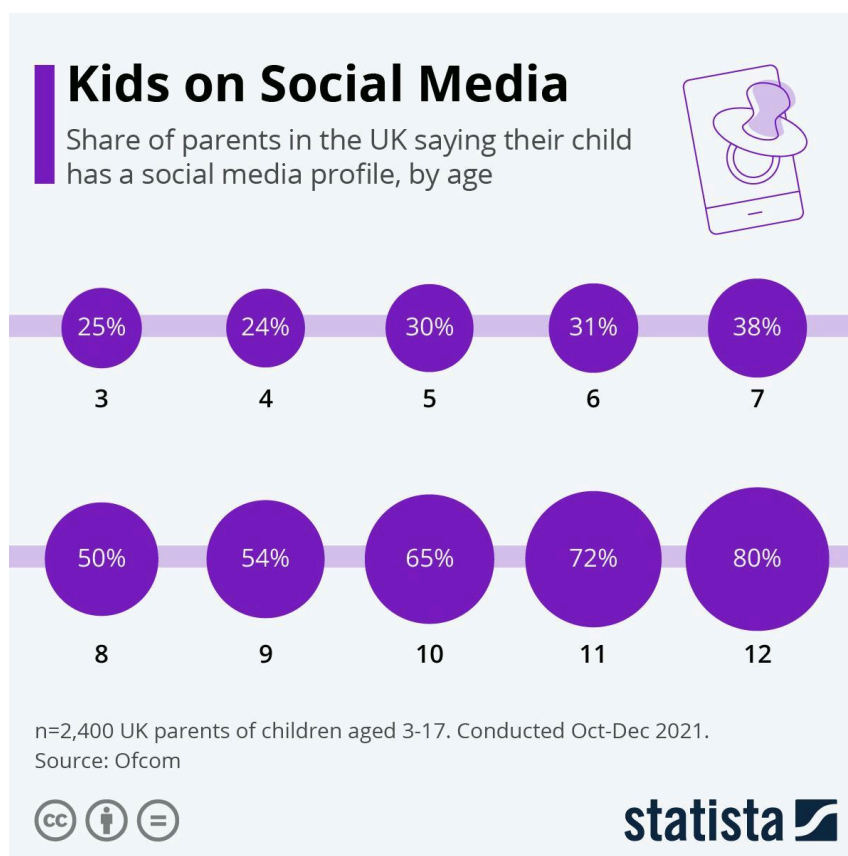
Is your country working to build new laws to regulate Social Media?

What challenges do the children in your country face that make them more vulnerable?

What international framework should this committee pass to solve the issue worldwide?

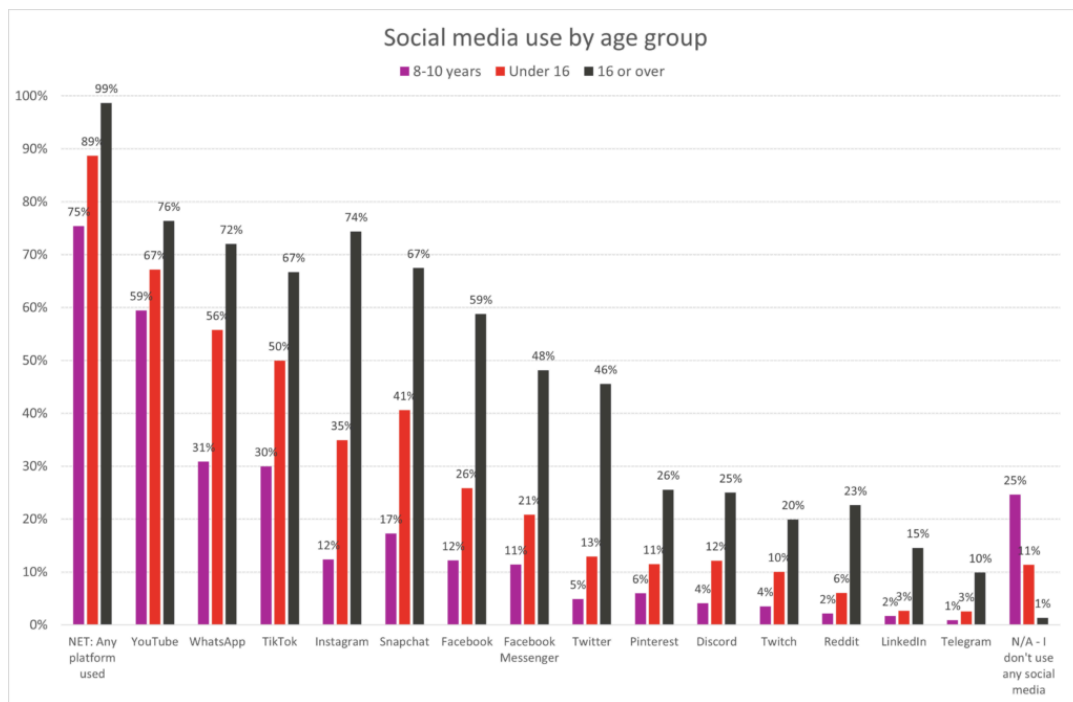
Helpful Resources and Media

- [How Media & Technology Affects Children | Child Development](#)
- [How social media influences the mental & behavioral health of children age 13 to 17](#)

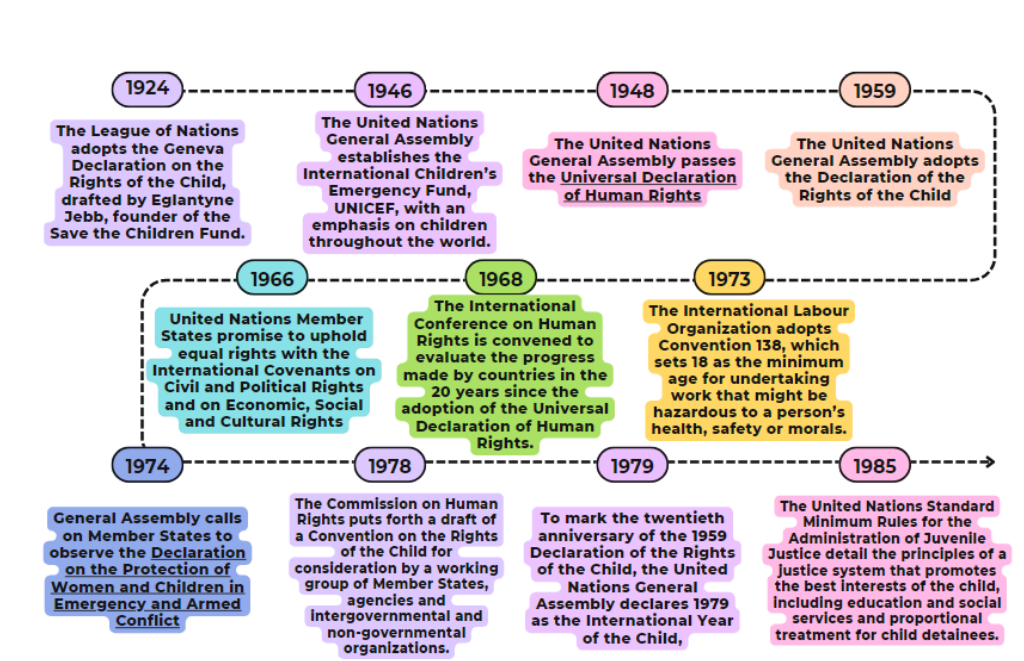


[Kids on Social Media - statistica](#)

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One of the things that has struck me during this research, is how dependent we are today on digital technology - nominate



Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) 35th Anniversary

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