Shaping digital inclusion, safety, and wellbeing in a post pandemic world

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Table of Contents:

List of figures:

List of tables:

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1. Introduction

Young Men's Christian Associations Romania Federation (YMCA Romania), the coordinator, together with Young Initiative Association - Romania (AYI), Sdrujenie "Nadejda-CRD" - Bulgaria (Nadejda), The Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service - France (CCIVS) and the Alliance Europeenne des YMCA - Belgium (YMCA Europe), as partners, are implementing the strategic youth partnership project *#AlwaysON for Youth* between April 2021 - April 2023. The project is co-financed by the European Union through the Erasmus+ Program.

One of the activities carried out within this project aimed at researching how can youth workers and young people shape digital inclusion and safety in the post-pandemic world. This goal was materialised in the **European Year of Youth (2022)**, thus raising awareness on the pandemic's implications for young people and youth workers.
To achieve the goal of the research, two research objectives have been pursued:

- Identify emerging trends and the changes brought by COVID-19 when it comes to the digital inclusion of young people, including the opportunities and challenges around it, with a practical outcome/recommendation for the target audience.
- Identify emerging trends in terms of digital safety and wellbeing, as well as the capacity of young people to detect threats to their online presence and of youth workers to equip them with the required skills.

The research process started in summer 2021 and had the following steps:

1. Create the **terms of reference** (June – July 2021).
2. Conduct a **literature review** (June – August 2021) and identify relevant sources related to digital youth work, digital safety, digital wellbeing, and digital inclusion.
3. Develop the **methodology** (July – September 2021) and discuss the working definitions, guide for interviews, and profile of the respondents.
4. Apply the **methodology** and interview minimum of 50 youth workers and minimum 50 young people (August – November 2021).
5. **Organize and analyse the data** from the interviews (November 2021 – February 2022).
6. Apply a **public survey** (January 2022) to add data to the information extracted from the interviews and to gather quantitative inputs to the research process. The survey aimed at gathering minimum of 250 responses from youth workers and young people mainly.
7. Produce the **draft research report/conclusions** (February – April 2022) based on the information from the interviews and the data retrieved from the public survey.
8. Organise a **virtual laboratory** for young people and youth workers to discuss the draft research and receive feedback from the participants (28 March 2022).
9. **Update the research** with the conclusions of the virtual laboratory and the feedback of the research team (April 2022).
10. **Publish the final report** and disseminate the research findings.

The **research team** was composed of experts nominated by each partner organisation as follows: YMCA Romania - 3 experts, Young Initiative Association - 3 experts, YMCA Europe - 2 experts and the research coordinator, Nadejda-CRD - 2 experts and CCIVS - 1 expert. Each expert was involved in the research process from the beginning until the end and provided inputs according to the common methodology developed. The profile of the experts varied according to the specifics of each partner organisation: some representatives of the consortium nominated members of the staff that has extensive youth work experience, and others involved members of the staff with previous research experience in youth research.

The **methodology** adopted for this research process included: a common list of working definitions, details about the profile of the respondents for the interviews, guides and guidelines for the interviews and a guide for the public survey.

The working definitions used by the research team were meant to ensure a common level of understanding of the main concepts and to provide the participants in the interviews with basic information about the topics discussed. These definitions have been developed by the information retrieved from the literature review:

- **Digital youth work:** using digital technologies to implement/take part in youth work activities. It includes reaching young people in online spaces for digital youth work activities.
- **Digital inclusion** (in the context of digital youth work)**:** ensuring/having the access and the necessary knowledge, competences, devices, skills to take part in digital youth work activities and generally in the online world, especially for disadvantaged/vulnerable groups.
- **Digital wellbeing** (in the context of digital youth work): looking at the impact on mental and physical health digital technologies generate, before/during/after digital youth work activities. It represents the smart usage of technologies to improve your life and not distract from it.
- **Digital safety** (in the context of digital youth work): equipping people/being equipped with the necessary tools (knowledge, competencies) to protect themselves/oneself online. To understand risks and threats in digital environments, protect devices and digital content, your data and privacy, avoiding health risks for physical and psychological well-being while using digital technologies.

The **profile of the respondents** targeted for the interviews included details both for youth workers and young people. In the case of the **youth workers**, the preliminary profile was related to:
- Paid or voluntary professionals from EU countries who are actively working with young people.
- Working with marginalised/vulnerable young people) in their communities through offline and/online means, supporting their personal and professional development.
- Being involved in digital youth work or have attempted to use digital youth work practices.
Furthermore, to ensure a relevant and an equitable level of answers to the interviews, the research team has also sought to identify potential respondents among youth workers that:

- Have proven experience in working with young people for at least 2 years (either through dedicated projects/programs, or by activating in a youth centre).
- Have experience in using digital media for working with young people, either because of adapting to the conditions generated by the pandemic or have actively tried to implement work activities with young people at a distance, even if they have failed.
- Have ongoing activity (organizations/people who are constant in their activity or have periods longer than 6 months/year of activity).

In terms of the **young people** targeted for the interviews, the following criteria have been applied when selecting the respondents:
- Youth aged 16 - 25 from European countries who are connected to a youth organisation (even remote) as beneficiaries.
- Minimum 25% of the young people involved in the research activities are young people with fewer opportunities.
- Previous/current digital youth work participation was not a requirement, as the focus was on their needs to the main topics discussed.
- Inclusion principles: living in different areas (rural, urban, etc.) and at least 30% are female respondents.

The description of the **public survey** included a reference to the target groups, being focused on youth workers and young persons (16-25) from Europe (without being limited to). Several teachers, parents and other demographic categories have also been involved in answering the questions in the public survey.

In total, **447 people shared their opinions and insights** in the research process:
- **61 young people** (15 to 33 yrs., the majority being between 15 to 20 yrs.) were interviewed.
- **60 youth workers** (19 to 52 yrs.) were interviewed.
- **326 young people and youth workers** (and a small minority of teachers and parents) answered the public survey.

The **geographic reach of the research** was the following:
- Two organisations out of five members of the consortium were from Romania, which meant reaching a broader audience in the country.
- One organisation was from Bulgaria and reached respondents from different cities and with various demographic backgrounds.
- Two organisations have a European reach and contributed with inputs from respondents living in different European countries thus ensuring a wide European perspective for the research.

The research presents data that was mostly (>50%) retrieved from Central and Eastern European countries, thus offering insights from a region where few previous thematic analyses have been identified. However, it also offers relevant and valuable insights from youth workers and young people residing in other parts of Europe (mostly West and South).

The mechanism used to test the validity of the research findings was represented by the virtual laboratory, which took place at the end of March 2022. Almost 30 youth workers and

young people took part in the event, which facilitated the sharing of the draft research and the main findings.

2. Key findings: digital inclusion and safety in a post-pandemic world

The research process has provided inputs to understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the youth workers and young people, in relation to digital youth work. The key findings from the interviews, the public survey and the virtual laboratory are the following:

→ **Digital youth work** gained traction during the pandemic, and we can affirm that is here to stay; a new spectrum of activities opens and others, more traditional ones, are becoming obsolete since working digitally needs a lot of training that must/will be used from now on.

→ There are **benefits of the online work** pursued during the pandemic which should be translated into improving the quality of (digital) youth work; however, a process of internal evaluation should be followed by NGOs to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the digital youth work implemented since March 2020.

→ The online activities allowed for recording some of the online sessions which could be accessed by those who couldn't participate or by **those who needed more time to understand some things**. Working online also gives the youth worker the circumstance to **act quickly and to react fast when this is needed**.

→ While the formal education sector received government support to facilitate the transition to an online learning environment, the non-formal education sector (including youth work) has changed and adapted to the online environment but mainly due to **the personal investment of youth workers.**

→ The young people shared that they prefer accessing learning contexts outside the online environment with direct contact with people, as they need opportunities to talk to each other. They felt that **the pandemic was taking away some of the opportunities for personal and informal contact** despite youth workers have been very dedicated and inspiring from the beginning.

→ Digital youth work is mostly understood by using **digital tools to facilitate online non-formal learning experiences** and in some cases, it seeks to recreate offline experiences; there is a strong need to consider digital youth work as an extension of youth work, but without limiting it to the online environment (few youth workers spoke about using digital tools in offline settings).

→ **Digital safety** was relatively easy to be defined by youth workers and young people who had similar opinions. Many explanations were focused on creating a safe digital place to run non-formal activities.

→ However, **digital wellbeing** was hard to define for some youth workers and young people. While many of the respondents shared an opinion on what it means, the explanations varied according to the experience (some referred to feeling alright online, while others considered other factors such as the impact on both mental and physical health).

→ In terms of the **challenges and opportunities identified to digital safety and wellbeing during the pandemic,** the respondents mostly reflected the challenges in the answers. This might be explained because the pandemic triggered a sudden change for the professional and personal patterns, thus requiring more effort to adapt to the new situation.

→ Some organisations that have implemented **practices related to digital safety** but in very few cases these actions have been transformed into procedures. In the case of **digital wellbeing**, most of the youth workers affirmed they have not used related procedures or practices and some of them did not even consider doing so until answering this interview.

→ **1 in 5 respondents does not feel prepared to implement digital safety practices**, thus making it a real need to invest in the related capacities of youth workers.

→ **Digital inclusion** was often seen from the perspective of accessibility, connection, interaction, and digital competencies. Some of the definitions offered by both the youth workers and the young people overlapped with the understanding of digital safety.

→ **Working on inclusion is time-consuming** and it needs a lot of other resources (skills, funding, etc.). It is a challenge for many organisations to reach out to young people with different backgrounds because of the limited capacity they have in their organisation to invest in this work.

→ **The pandemic advanced the digitization process of the organisations** by identifying solutions and areas to develop, adapting tools to target groups, and accessing a variety of online instruments for increasing the digital literacy of the youth workers and the beneficiaries.

→ **Young people prefer offline environments** to express themselves, but they also see the benefits of online participation. Hybrid interaction was seen less as positive by youth workers and young people, and they tend to choose from online or offline when the case.

→ The **online environment was mostly associated with negative emotions** (e.g., the polarization on social media, the harmful comments).

→ 69% of the respondents said that **they sometimes feel bad when spending time online**, the main reason being that of losing track of time.

→ **More than 50% of the young people affirmed they have faced different challenges during the pandemic**; around 40% of them said that they did not experience any challenge related to digital safety and wellbeing.

→ **Digital fatigue** was the most observed negative trend during the pandemic. The participants of the public survey also rated the impact of the pandemic on their **mental health** as negative.

→ The frequency associated with digital fatigue is worrisome, **with 74.84% affirming that they have faced this situation sometimes or often**. In addition to this, **digital stress** was experienced by **64.11% of the respondents.**

→ The answers provided show that **most of the respondents are not familiar with digital trends and new technologies such as inhumane technology, deep fakes, Internet of Behaviours, Internet of Things and hyperconnectivity**. In the case of the metaverse, artificial Intelligence, facial recognition algorithms and working/interacting with robots, many respondents affirmed they are slightly familiar with these topics.

→ The only two topics where **1 in 4 respondents evaluate themselves as highly familiar are artificial intelligence and facial recognition algorithms**.

→ **93.6% of the respondents to the public survey** affirmed that it is very important to **have well-equipped youth workers** that can empower and support young people in the post-pandemic world.

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3. Perspectives of the youth workers on digital inclusion, wellbeing, and safety

In autumn 2021, 60 youth workers were interviewed by the research team. In this process, the experts have conducted individual interviews, mostly online. The age of the respondents varied between **19 and 52 yrs**. More than 50% of the respondents are from Romania and Bulgaria, and about 40% are from Albania, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, and Ukraine. The distribution of the respondents to the interviews was the following:

- **YMCA Europe** interviewed 17 youth workers from 13 European countries (Spain, Scotland, Georgia, Greece, Albania, Ukraine, Georgia, Georgia, Ukraine, Scotland, Czech Republic, Sweden, Malta, Italy, Netherlands, Denmark, and Russia). The age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 46 years and the answers were expressed primarily in relation to their nongovernmental experience in the local or national YMCA.
- **Sdrujenie Nadejda-CRD** interviewed 14 youth workers from Bulgaria. The age of the respondents ranged from 25 to 48 years. All of them are part of non-governmental organisations dedicated to working with young people. They represent small to large-scale organisations from the whole country and youth networks.
- **YMCA Romania** interviewed 10 youth workers from Romania. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 43 years and the answers were expressed primarily in relation to their experience in the local or regional nongovernmental organisation.
- **CCIVS** interviewed 9 youth workers from 4 European countries (Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Hungary). The age ranged from 25 to 35 years and the answers were expressed primarily regarding their youth work experience in local, regional, national, or international youth work. The group of respondents was very diverse and included both youth workers employed by governmental institutions and those working in a nongovernmental setting.
- **Young Initiative Association** interviewed 10 youth workers from Romania. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 52 years and the answers were expressed primarily based on their nongovernmental experience (from local, regional, or national level).
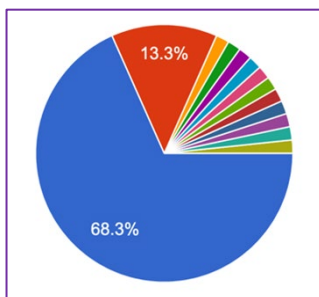
Figure 1. Percentage of respondents working with vulnerable young people

Most of the respondents (68.3%) affirmed that **they work with vulnerable people** such as young people from Roma communities or HIV positive, young refugees, and unaccompanied minors (Figure 1). Some respondents specified that they have certain projects addressed to vulnerable persons such as alphabetization, and integration activities.

In terms of the actions implemented during the pandemic (starting with March 2020), some youth workers affirmed that during this time they have not worked with vulnerable groups, while others said that they have used digital youth work techniques to reach this target group.

The questions addressed to the youth workers were aimed at understanding: how they define digital youth work, what kind of digital youth activities they implemented before and during the pandemic, how do they define digital safety, digital wellbeing and digital inclusion, what kind of practices do they have regarding these fields, what kind of

challenges/opportunities they identified in relation to these fields during the pandemic, what kind of trends/changes they have observed about these fields and what type of support would they need to better adapt to the trends observed. The interviews have been coded, being analysed without the identification of the source.

We found out that **there isn't a common definition used to describe digital youth work**, but interpretations that include common features; most youth workers identified similar elements (e.g., use of online tools, creating online spaces, supporting the professional and personal development of young people). The respondents said about digital youth work that:

- The focus is on the digital means **of connecting individuals, the educational process, and the environment** in which non-formal activities take place.
- Can be seen as **a tool, as a social interaction process, and as a process** focussing on empowerment and learning.
- **Includes online activities**, based on non-formal education such as: creating, developing, and maintaining digital youth spaces, online training, voluntary activities, fundraising campaigns, advocacy for vulnerable groups, etc.; these activities complement offline activities.
- **Is done to support the development of skills for young people**, to create a community, and the activities need to be inclusive and represent a good opportunity for people to connect.
- Represents **an online non-formal space, without borders and limitations,** where an infinity of non-formal experiences can be explored.

The answers focused primarily on the use of online tools to design non-formal virtual activities for young people. However, in a few cases, the youth workers mentioned that digital youth work is an extension of youth work in digital space, but it requires adaptability and flexibility to be efficient and relevant for the beneficiaries.
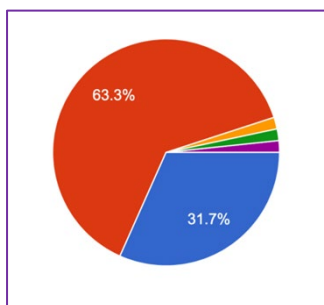
Figure 2. Percentage of respondents not involved in digital youth work before the pandemic

In terms of **doing digital youth work before the pandemic**, most of the youth workers affirmed (Figure 2) that they did not have this experience (63.3%). Some of them referred to digital youth work before March 2020 as using online tools to communicate with young people. Their understanding of digital youth work has evolved during the pandemic (starting with March 2020 onwards) from a process that was rather seen as interesting but less important to a process that has brought the organisation to a new level in working with young people.

During lockdown (depending on the country of origin of different respondents, this period was initially attributed to the time frame between March 2020 and June 2020), **different activities were developed**, which required the youth workers to switch to new tools and environments fast, to reach the young people. Regarding this time frame, there were youth workers mentioning that they started with **an initial freeze in the activities**, not knowing how to move on in times of social restriction measures. Others talked about a transition period, in which they assessed what can be done by the NGO in the new context and how they should reach their target groups. The process of adjustment during the pandemic differed from a simple transition to

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a complex reorganisation at the NGO level, and in some cases, activities, processes, and procedures changed or expanded to new fields.

Comments about doing digital youth work before and during the pandemic:
- In most cases, the offline activities of the organisation **were adapted to or simply moved to online** (digital youth work was seen as doing the same activity as offline but for an online audience)
- **In some cases, a reflection process was implemented,** and digital youth work is now considered an essential part of the organisation while **in other cases the shift** to setting up online activities **was seen only as a temporary measure**
- In some cases, **youth workers started online research** on how the pandemic affects the community
- During the pandemic, **the model of hybrid work emerged**, with youth workers implementing online and offline services
- **The use of new digital tools and platforms** by youth workers and organisations represented a growing trend during the pandemic

Among the **activities implemented in different phases of the pandemic**, we can mention:
- meetings, workshops, training, webinars, team buildings,
- training for youth leaders and animators,
- individual mentoring for youth workers,
- counselling and mentoring provided to young people,
- engaging with young people through social media asking them to interact,
- development of MOOC and/or other online learning materials,
- virtual workcamps and online quizzes and games,
- recreational & socialising activities,
- extracurricular activities/peer to peer education.

Digital safety is often seen by the youth workers **as creating safe online environments for the young people they work with**; another key element in fostering digital literacy so that young people can become more aware of the online dangers and risks.

Understanding the background for practices (or lack thereof) regarding digital safety:
- Most practices and new measures have been put in place during the pandemic (in many cases, respondents affirmed that they did not have any organisational measures or practices related to digital safety before the pandemic and the change of situation lead to adopting new ways of working with young people and paying attention to issues that were not widespread before March 2020)
- There are very few cases in which detailed procedures have been adopted; in a significant number of cases, respondents saw measures/practices as procedures, without discerning clearly between them
- In many cases, respondents referred to the need to create a safe space for participants but did not mention specific procedures that document the whole process of building a safe space
- Nobody mentioned standards regarding digital wellbeing or safety

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Practices regarding digital safety:

- The practices adopted in the field of digital safety were mostly focused on: **technical improvements, new procedures, and digital safety-related activities**
- In terms of **technical measures**, the youth workers mentioned: using/buying new software, having a secure network and cloud storage, providing personalised links for each activity, having members in the organisation that monitor digital and IT issues
- In terms of **procedures**, there were mentioned: GDPR, code of conduct in online events and one-on-one meetings, parents' consent for minors taking part in online activities, agreements with participants on registering or taking pictures during online meetings
- For **digital safety-related activities**, included workshops about online safety and cyberbullying, cyber security awareness campaigns, rights, and obligations on social media
- A series of changes were also implemented regarding information sharing, more precaution for online payments, improved communication between youth workers and the young people, within the organisation

Figure 3. On a scale from 1 to 10, how prepared are the respondents to implement digital safety practices in digital youth work?

To the question (Figure 3) about the level of preparedness (1 = not at all prepared, 5 = somewhat prepared and 10 = fully prepared) for implementing digital safety practices in digital youth work, most respondents affirmed they are **fairly prepared**. A possible explanation for the grades offered might have to do with the fact that **they already have in place measures and practices** related to digital safety**, but they need to also develop procedures.**

Also, it is mentioned that **1 in 5 respondents does not feel prepared to implement digital safety practices**, thus making it a real need to invest in the related capacities of youth workers.

When asking about **digital wellbeing,** we observed that it was hard for some youth workers to define it, and they mainly referred to the mental health aspect of the online interaction (recognising how being online can affect your mental health and your physical health).

Understanding the background for practices (or lack thereof) regarding digital wellbeing

- Many respondents affirmed that there are no procedures on digital wellbeing adopted in the organisation

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- Some of them argued that it is difficult to define this topic and to see how it related to the work of the organisation
- The ones that offered examples of practices spoke mostly about mental health support or flexibility/adaptability in working with young people
- Some respondents gave examples of digital safety when the topic of digital wellbeing was introduced (e.g., GDPR)

Practices regarding digital wellbeing:
- Some of the practices mentioned focused on the **need for flexibility in adapting the schedule** according to the needs of the beneficiaries
- In specific cases, there were mentioned as practices: **creating physical spaces where mental health problems** related to the digital sphere **can be discussed** with peers; **employing a psychologist to offer support related to addiction, loneliness**, etc.; creating a series of podcasts with youngsters about mental wellbeing
- **Using common/good sense practices/agreements** and measures were also shared such as: using civilised language, respecting the opinions of others, non-discriminating, etc.
- Some youth workers spoke about **sharing recommendations during the activities for physical exercise and monitoring time spent online** and posture while being in front of the screen
- Many respondents said while they do not have practices in digital wellbeing, they would like **to receive training on this topic** and develop new measures and procedures

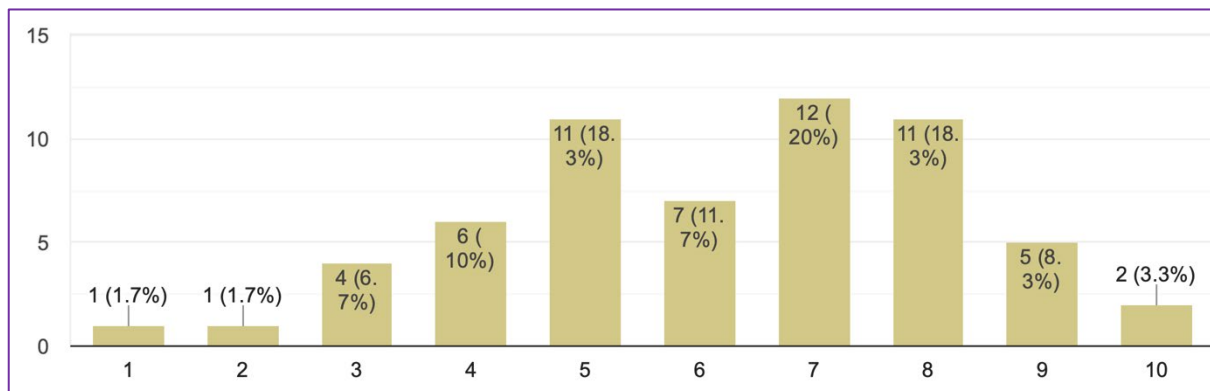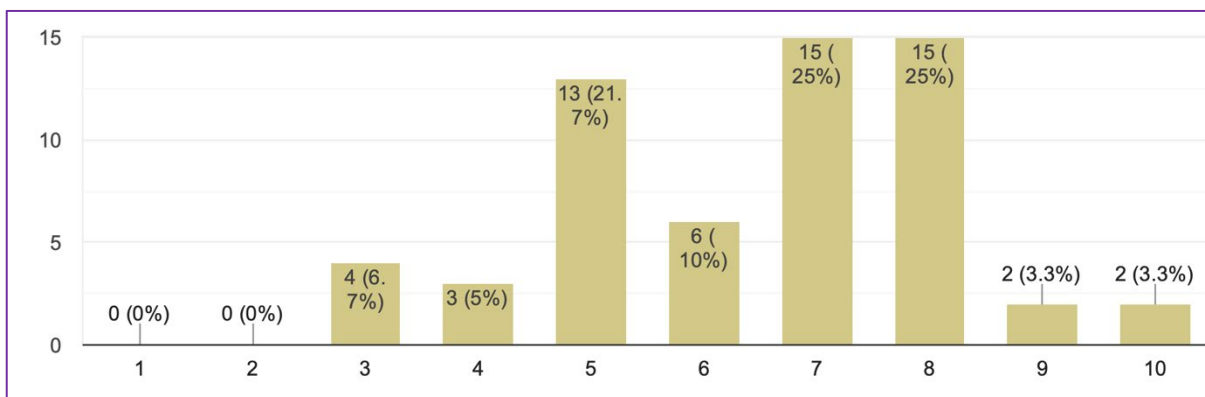*Figure 4. On a scale from 1 to 10, how prepared are the respondents to implement digital wellbeing practices in digital youth work?*

Many respondents affirmed (Figure 4) that they are **mostly prepared** to implement digital wellbeing practices. It might seem surprising that the grades are higher than in the digital safety case. One way we could interpret this case is that **the respondents are aware they do not have practices or procedures but are prepared/ready to implement procedures** related to digital wellbeing. Another explanation might have to do with the fact that digital wellbeing practices are less technical to implement than digital safety measures, thus the effort and the time invested could be at a lower extent.

In terms of the **challenges and opportunities identified in relation to digital safety and wellbeing during the pandemic (in digital youth work contexts)**, the respondents mostly answered for the challenges. This might be explained because the pandemic triggered a

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sudden change in the professional and personal patterns, thus requiring more effort to adapt to the new situation.

When addressing the challenges, there were physical barriers, lack of contact between people, lack of digital skills, motivation for online work, and digital fatigue. Some of the opportunities encountered are the connection with those who are remote, contribution to the community wellbeing, advanced digitalization, working with new platforms, and ease of participation.

Challenges:

- **Dealing with digital fatigue** (often called Zoom fatigue or digital tiredness) and with the **stress of using new platforms**/tools (where young people often have more competencies than youth workers).
- The difficulty to adapt to the needs of the audience (in online formats) when the feedback is missing (**it's hard to build trust online** when the body language is not visible, as it is more difficult to understand how the young person is feeling during an activity).
- One major challenge was represented by **undeveloped digital skills**. The process shifted the focus of the youth workers from the learning process to troubleshooting, teaching platform functions, and developing competencies necessary for the digital environment.
- Challenges related to **motivation** were felt through the effort put in by the **facilitators to maintain the attention** and to ensure the **participants' commitment** to the activity taking place.
- **The difficulty to establish a connection** with the participants, especially when they do not turn their webcam on.
- The search to develop activities with young people to **educate them about the digital safety risks but without being overprotective**.
- Respondents shared they were challenged to be sure who is on the other side, the anonymity of young people, no authenticity of the contact, and the security of the relationship.
- One common challenge regarding digital wellbeing was that youth workers and young people have been **overloaded with virtual activities**, thus contributing to their overall level of tiredness.
- Another challenge for the youth workers in terms of digital wellbeing was related to the **increased efforts to prepare for digital youth work activities** well in advance (many respondents shared that it's far more demanding to develop activities for online formats than for offline ones, as you cannot improvise as it would happen in face-to-face settings).
- **Lack of competencies to work with vulnerable youth** through digital means and in online formats.
- Missing information about the **impact of digital youth work** due to a lack of quantitative measurements.

Opportunities:

- The overall contribution to the **community's well-being** as groups of people managed to connect in ways they have never done before and explored the importance of resilience and adaptation to challenging situations.
- Digital youth work led to **an extensive digitalization of the organisation**, with many respondents affirming that the human resources involved adapted rapidly to the new context, developed digital competencies, discovered new tools, and learned new things which gave access to a diversity of activities.
- The subjects related to **digital safety and digital wellbeing gained traction** during the pandemic (before March 2020, there were not so many youth workers discussing these concepts in youth activities).
- More organisations started to become interested in **how they can ensure the digital safety of the participants** taking part in youth activities (both in terms of methods, but also as practices and internal measures).
- Inspiring **more individuals to move past fears** and being willing to be open-minded, self-actualize, and improve through a wide variety of online activities which offered unique learning context situations, through co-creation and youth empowerment.
- Professional and personal development was possible because of online learning since the pandemic started, which opened new possibilities for **the creation of new content, methodologies, and programs** dedicated to young beneficiaries.
- The youth workers had **more tools to access digital youth work** and the possibility to use platforms to enhance the learning contexts created.
- Some of the youth workers affirmed that **online activities could transform the work with the youth**, as digital gadgets are used by young people daily.
- **Running digital activities can save a lot of pollution**, and a lot of waste of energy and resources, a very important aspect for the young people who are concerned about climate change.

When asked about the **trends related to digital safety and wellbeing observed since the pandemic started,** the youth workers mentioned:

- **Digital fatigue** (in some cases it was called Zoom fatigue or digital tiredness). This was the most common answer and was seen as a common challenge during the pandemic.
- Less socialisation between youth, and the **tendency to isolate** became latent issues, which shifted in trend the perception of the usefulness of wellbeing.
- Organisations and youth workers are **much more aware of digital safety issues** and start questioning the tools they are using.
- **Burnout among youth workers**, some said that some don't feel the satisfaction they felt before (from offline activities).
- The increase in **mental health problems and anxiety** coupled with feelings of loneliness, depression, "cave syndrome" or being afraid to go out, are major trends seen with young people.
- The issue of "**copy-paste attitude**", where risky/malicious offline behaviours were exacerbated online (e.g., bullying).
- Participation in online activities turned into **a background activity** in youth's routine.

- The perception is that young people feel rather **safer interacting through video meetings** than in person.

Another subject from the interviews with the youth workers was related to digital inclusion. This concept was mostly understood by the respondents as having the right to, the tools for, and equal access to digital youth work. Digital inclusion was also seen as a process of equipping young people in digital activities with the right set of tools and practices so they can thrive and actively bring a benefit to the process of digital youth work.

When asked about the practices (or lack thereof) related to digital inclusion, the following conclusions were drawn about the experience of the youth workers:

- In some cases, measures, practices, or procedures related to digital inclusion were mentioned.
- The respondents talked about digital inclusion practices from an organisational point of view (reaching vulnerable youth) and from the youth workers' interaction with young people (during the activities).
- In some cases, references to practices related to digital inclusion overlapped with the answers from digital safety and wellbeing, showing that there isn't a clear separation between these concepts.
- While there were many cases in which youth workers said they do not have digital inclusion practices, they specified having different approaches and methods to reach young people and integrate them into the youth activities.

In terms of illustrating the practices implemented in the organisation about digital inclusion, a couple of remarks have been drawn:

- In many cases, vulnerable beneficiaries were **provided with digital tools and devices** during the pandemic; some organisations specified collaborating with schools and municipalities to give young people access to computers and the internet.
- In many cases, the selection of the platforms was based on the **friendly interfaces** and the needs of the youth.
- Some practices consisted in **including subtitles** to improve the accessibility of the materials and **providing translation** for minority groups (previously it was not possible due to logistical costs).
- Other practices were focused on **building/improving digital literacy** through related activities (the beneficiaries were taught how to use certain platforms and digital tools).
- Some youth workers talked about **identifying the factors that exclude young people** from participating in digital youth work (young people living in geographically remote areas, people with disabilities, Roma youth, LGBT+ young people, people with dyslexia, HIV positive people, young people without access to internet and devices were directly contacted by youth workers).
- Many youth workers also specified **the increase in communication with young people**, especially through direct messaging apps to consult about the best time to organise activities.
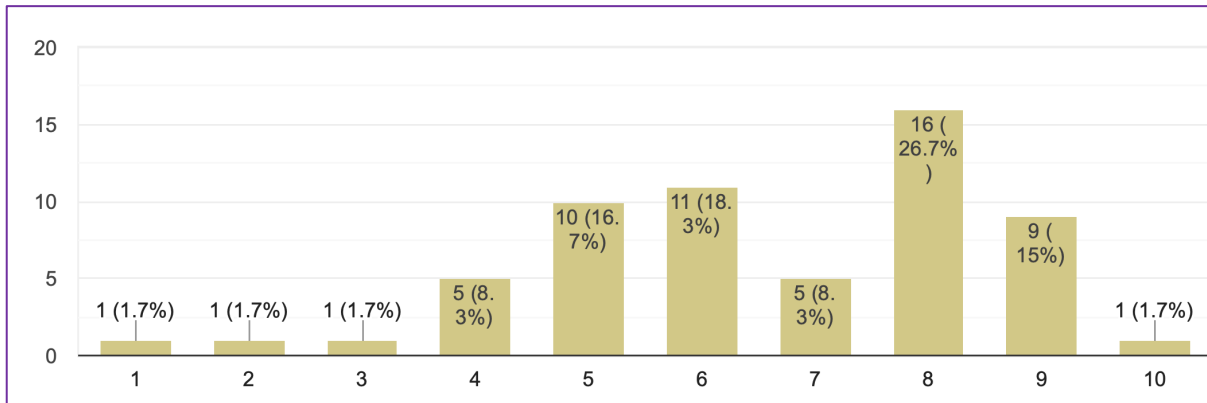
Figure 5. On a scale from 1 to 10, how prepared are the respondents to implement digital inclusion practices in digital youth work?

To the question (Figure 5) about the level of preparedness (1 = not at all prepared, 5 = somewhat prepared and 10 = fully prepared) for implementing digital inclusion practices in digital youth work, more than 50% evaluate themselves as **highly prepared**. A possible explanation for the grades offered might have to do with their **understanding of the need for these practices** and the assessment that they are ready to upgrade their way of working with young people to reach a broader audience.

The question of **challenges and opportunities for digital inclusion** in the context of digital youth work offered more insights on how youth workers position themselves on this topic. A conclusion for this research is that often challenges related to digital inclusion overlapped with the ones related to digital wellbeing (particularly regarding the access to youth activities).

Some of the challenges identified are related to the: access to digital equipment, internet, lack of digital skills, mindset issues, addressing the marginalised youth, and, lastly, the need for transversal skills development. In terms of opportunities, the respondents mentioned: that more youth have access to digital activities and information, open access to resources and training events, geographical and physical barriers have been reduced, more digital interactive content is used in non-formal settings, sharing resources between organisations has been advanced.

Challenges:

- **The stereotype of considering young people digital literate** due to their constant use of the internet and gadgets (many youth workers addressed this as an issue to be addressed in relation to digital inclusion).
- **Working on inclusion is very time-consuming** and it needs a lot of resources (time, skills, funding). It is a challenge for many organisations to reach out to young people with different backgrounds because of the limited capacity they have in their organisation to invest in this work.
- The **poor quality of the internet infrastructure in most vulnerable areas**, this issue being doubled in some cases by the lack of devices and skills. Oftentimes, young people from vulnerable groups do not have the resources to equip themselves with devices to attend digital youth work activities.

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- Some of the respondents assessed that not all beneficiaries wanted to be included in the digital work because they were not aware of this need. Moreover, even if the participants were connected - **their participation was understood often in terms of being present, not in terms of being active in the long run**.
- Working with vulnerable groups, people with disabilities, and young people with difficult backgrounds is a test for staff members and volunteers alike. It has been stated that **organisations alone could not support all the vulnerable groups** and that in many instances the attempts to provide the right assistance have failed.
- **Providing adequate support to young people with disabilities** and the lack of resources to adapt materials and tools to make them more inclusive.
- **The quality of digital inclusion** is difficult to be addressed/measured. Youth workers often mentioned the issue to connect on a personal level with the participants thus not being able to assess the level of feeling included in the activities.

Opportunities:

- **Reach more young people who are remote** but willing to take part in digital youth work (many youth workers affirmed that the pandemic context contributed to a general increase in the number of beneficiaries for the activities, especially in 2020).
- For young people who have difficulties attending face-to-face activities, **it can be easier to connect** and stay involved in digital youth work. The pandemic has proved that in times of crisis, people must be resilient and adapt for the optimal solutions.
- The online activities allowed for recording some of the online sessions which could be accessed by those who couldn't participate or by **those who needed more time to understand some things**. Working online also gives the youth worker the circumstance to **act quickly and to react fast when this is needed**.
- Creating digital youth work contexts can also help connect people from different places having similar needs, thus creating opportunities to **bring together peer groups that otherwise would have difficulties meeting** (LGTBQ+ group).
- **Advance the digitization process of the organisation** by identifying solutions and areas to develop, adapting tools to target groups, accessing a variety of online instruments for increasing the digital literacy of the youth workers and the beneficiaries.
- There was **an increase in the level of awareness about problems related to anxiety and depression**, this being an opportunity to tackle stigma and to include in the activities young people who faced these issues and need personalised support.
- **The hybrid approach** was seen as an opportunity to include more young people, but it requires staff to manage the logistical/technical aspects and to have an allocated budget.

When asked about the observed trends regarding digital inclusion, the youth workers generally referred to:

- The **increase in the number of beneficiaries and** the emergence of **new learning opportunities.**

- Most of the youth workers said that since the pandemic started, they have reached **a larger number of young people**, from various backgrounds and geographically distant, by organising online projects and activities.
- Organisations have **developed their capacity for digital youth work** and reaching vulnerable groups.
- **More attention was given to digital inclusion** as many youth work organisations are trying to make their materials more accessible to young people.
- While the formal education sector received government support to facilitate the transition to an online learning environment, the non-formal education sector (including youth work) has changed and adapted to the online environment but mainly due to **the personal investment of youth workers.**
- Families of youngsters with fewer opportunities became **more aware of the importance of digital literacy.**
- Different youth workers talked about the emergence of the requirement to **hold participants accountable for their learning process.**

Type of support needed by youth workers for adapting to the trends related to digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion:

- **Training and skills development** (on all three elements, with a special focus on digital inclusion and wellbeing).
- **Procedures and good practices/guidance** (particularly in relation to digital wellbeing and digital inclusion).
- **Networking and consultations with youth workers** (this could also help identify common challenges and opportunities and set the background for developing common procedures).
- **Financial resources to implement related projects and activities** (predominantly about digital safety and inclusion, where youth workers argued that they need a budget allocated to be able to work on these topics).
- **Research and analyses** (about digital youth work, digital safety, inclusion, and wellbeing, understanding the impact of the pandemic on key areas related to working with young people).
- **Access to interactive platforms and databases** (generally, teachers were granted access/discounts to different online tools, and youth workers had to use their personal resources to access them for the benefit of their target groups).
- **Devices and internet for young people and youth workers** (in some cases, the young people were offered tablets or phones to connect to online education which could have been used for digital youth work as well; however, the quality of the learning process facilitated through a tablet, or a phone was not the same for the beneficiary as when using a laptop or a computer)
- **Developing common minimal standards on digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion** (this process could lead to an increase in the quality of the digital youth work activities and to a common understanding of these key elements).

4. Perspectives of the young people on digital inclusion, wellbeing, and safety

The interviews with the young people were conducted in Autumn 2021. Of those who answered the survey, 63.9% identify as female and 36.1% identify as male. The age ranged from 15 to 33 yrs. (**75.4% are aged between 15 and 20 yrs.**), thus being representative for the age group initially targeted for this survey (15-26 yrs.)

More than half of the respondents are from Romania and Bulgaria (given the reach of the partner organisations) and **34.4% are from Albania, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and Ukraine**. Among the respondents to the interviews, 24.6% live in a rural area, while 75.4% live in an urban area. **More than one third (36.1%) of the young people affirmed they have fewer opportunities**.

The questions addressed during the interviews were related to the participation in youth activities during the pandemic, the interaction with the youth workers after March 2020, learning new skills during the pandemic, digital platforms used to take part in youth activities, challenges faced during the pandemic related to digital safety, wellbeing and inclusion, the preferred environment to express oneself, type of support needed. The interviews have been coded, being analysed without the identification of the source.

When asked about **the participation in youth activities during the pandemic,** the respondents mentioned:

- **A high majority of young people took part in youth activities** during the pandemic.
- For a few respondents **the concept of youth activity was not clear** (unsure if some of the activities they attended can be integrated in this category) for others it was difficult to refer in time to the pandemic (starting lockdown, after lockdown, etc.).
- **During lockdown, the respondents participated in online activities**, and after they took part in **mixed settings** (be it online, offline, or hybrid); some highlighted that after lockdown the number of youth activities increased, and more organisations diversified their programmes.
- **Forms of youth activities** they attended: workshops, training and team building activities, debate clubs, scouting, sports, theatre and singing activities, Erasmus+ project activities, volunteer campaigns, charity campaigns, board games, etc.
- The **purpose of the youth activities** attended during the pandemic: develop digital and soft skills, volunteer and support the community (e.g., help set devices for vulnerable children), improve mental health and wellbeing.

The interaction with youth worker /trainers/youth counsellors/mentors/coordinators during the pandemic:

- Most of the respondents affirmed **there were changes in the interaction with youth workers.** When explaining the change, the respondents agreed that the contact with the youth workers was less direct and that there was a bigger distance between the young person and the youth worker. They didn't have the feeling they got to know their youth worker and the sense of intimacy was not the same. The fact that it is hard

to share emotions through a screen was mentioned as one of the reasons for this distance between youth workers and young people.

- The majority spoke about **positive changes** (the youth workers adapted quickly to the new changes in the light of the epidemic restrictions, tried to ease the effects of the crisis, offered support to young people, were available for them, pursued efficient communication endeavours). In some cases, the respondents noticed having **a much closer connection with the youth workers than before**, in an interactive and useful way.
- The minority of young people that addressed **challenges** referred to lack of interaction in some non-formal settings, the contact with youth workers was less direct and more distant, the feeling of not knowing the youth worker, the engagement of other participants during youth activities, more difficult to bond with mentors, lack of one-on-one interactions, hard to share emotions.
- The young people shared that they prefer accessing learning contexts outside the online environment with direct contact with people, as they need opportunities to talk to each other. They felt that **the pandemic was taking away some of the opportunities for personal and casual contact** despite youth workers having been very dedicated and inspiring from the beginning.
- **A few respondents** said that there were no changes in the interaction with youth workers or that they have not observed any.

To the question of **learning new skills during the pandemic**, the young people interviewed referred to:

- A high majority responded that **they learnt one or more skills** during the pandemic, some affirming that the pandemic context has helped them to grow professionally and/or personally (this was not necessarily related to digital youth work, as they viewed this question in a broader sense).
- Some of the respondents share that all they needed during the pandemic times was **mental support and support for life-awareness.**
- **Developed during the pandemic**: self-awareness, digital skills, operating with new platforms, structured communication, patience, resilience, managing own reactions, adapting to new situations, critical thinking skills, practising new hobbies/experimenting with new activities.
- **The few young people** who affirmed they did not learn new things during the pandemic said this was the case because they already had digital skills and were already familiar with using devices and various apps/platforms.

When inquired about the **digital platforms used by young people for taking part in digital youth work,** the following conclusions were drafted:

- **The preferred and most used online platform** was Zoom; some said it was more efficient to access it given that it was also used for online education, others argued that it can be employed for the short and long-form of communication and that it offers a wide range of functionalities (video, on-screen presentation, document sharing, etc.

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- The **other video conferencing** platforms mentioned after Zoom were Google Classroom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams.
- **Other channels/apps**: WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, TikTok, Discord, Jamboard, Mentimeter, Kahoot, Padlet, Snapchat, Skype, Jitsi.
- In some cases, **the preference in choosing one over the other** was manifested depending on the needs of the young people and the functions of the platform; in other cases, it was not clear who is the initiator (the youth worker or the young person).

Further on, the respondents provided different answers **to define digital safety and wellbeing,** most of them focusing on the responsibility of being aware of how to navigate the web and raising awareness of mental health.

Referring to **digital safety**, they mostly mentioned the need for privacy in matters of what they share, what information is stored on their personal data, and being able to secure personal details. The digital safety definitions also included the following elements: the protection against the dangers of the online environment (phishing, hacking, etc), the security of certain sites, applications, measures to work safely (antivirus, security protocols), personal data protection, lack of cyberbullying, etc.

In terms of **digital wellbeing**, they stressed the need for a balance of the time they spend online and offline doing activities. They pointed out that digital wellbeing is required for people to avoid burnout, overworking, and overall having a healthy lifestyle navigating online. The main characteristics of digital wellbeing are the use of technology in a healthy way, the balance between digital interaction and personal health, the absence of exhaustion, anxiety after working online, time management and taking regular breaks, and the lack of online addictions.

In a few cases, there was an overlap between digital safety and wellbeing, some respondents attributing aspects related to feeling comfortable online to digital safety. Another observation was that digital wellbeing is being seen as a new concept that emerged during the pandemic and gained importance in the following years. For many respondents, it was difficult to offer a tangible definition and they characterised digital wellbeing as **using digitalization in a good way.**
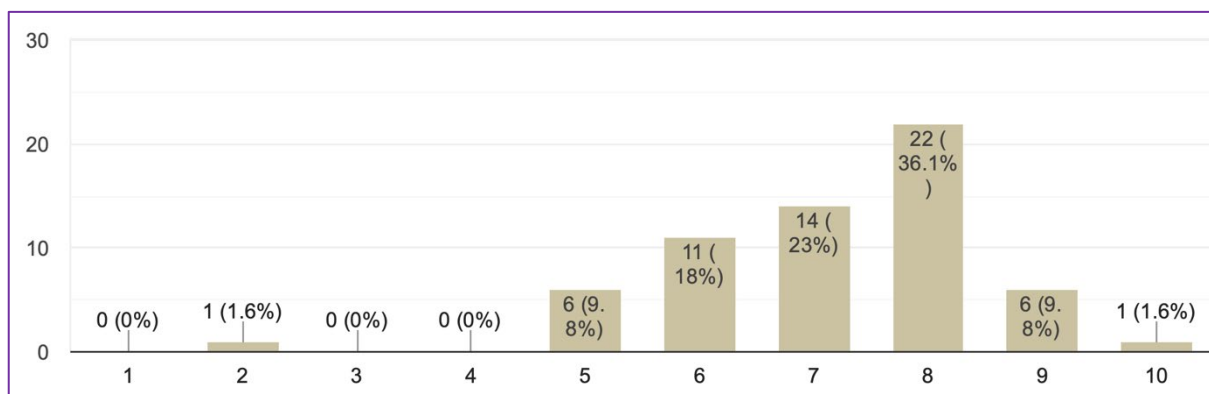

Figure 6. On a scale from 1 to 10, how safe do young people feel online?

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To the question (Figure 6) about the level of self-perceived digital safety (1 = not at all safe, 5 = somewhat safe and 10 = entirely safe), most of the respondents affirmed they feel safe online. This answer can be explained in relation to the high self-perceived competencies (assessed in the public survey and available in the following section of the report) to tackle online risks and dangers.

To the question inquiring about the **challenges faced during the pandemic in relation to digital safety and wellbeing**, the respondents offered a wide array of examples**. More than 50% of the young people affirmed they have faced different challenges** during the pandemic; around 40% of them said that they did not experience any challenge related to digital safety and wellbeing. Types of challenges mentioned:

- **Lack of human interaction**, disruptions due to the external environment and the feeling of **increased digital fatigue.**
- Low self-esteem due to **always comparing myself to others.**
- The **lack of physical exercise** and the excessive time spent online.
- **Difficulties to concentrate** and low motivation to participate in school and leisure time activities.
- Some closed themselves and/or **found it more difficult to communicate** with other people.
- The level of **family tensions** increased and **distance from friends** occurred (which made it even more difficult to connect with others and talk about personal issues).
- **Internet and connection disruptions affected the process of learning** (this issue was also observed by the youth workers).
- Disruptions in sleep patterns/**insomnias** (which may relate to the extensive use of technology).
- Becoming shy**/afraid to speak** in front of the camera (in some cases to the fear of being judged, recorded, or bullied).
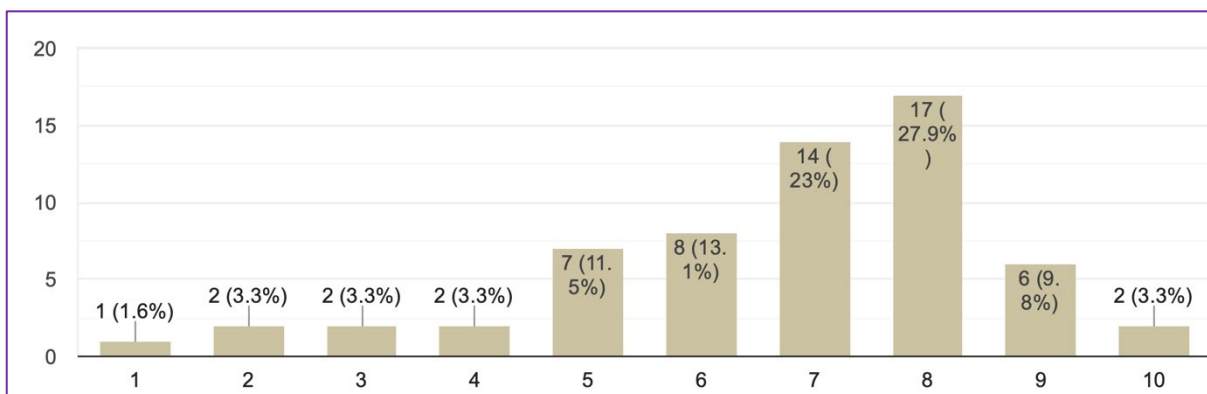
Figure 7. On a scale from 1 to 10, how do young people rate their digital wellbeing?

To the question (Figure 7) of rating their digital wellbeing (1 = not healthy at all, 5 = somewhat healthy and 10 = entirely healthy), most of the respondents affirmed their online presence feels healthy. A visible minority (compared to the previous case) affirmed they their digital wellbeing feels unhealthy (11.5%). This result can be coupled to the way digital wellbeing was defined by many respondents, who considered it a rather new topic and thus less easy to acknowledge in practical contexts.

Furthermore, a question about **detaching oneself from its digital presence** was addressed. Most respondents were aware of the need to detach from their online presence. Non-digital activities and digital detox actions were done through limiting the working time on the computer/phone, limiting access to social networks, disconnecting mobile data, setting the phone to "do not disturb" mode, following personal hobbies, making the choice to spend free time in nature, etc. Examples such as going for a walk, doing things outside, watching a sunset or landscape show how "the outdoor element" is important for young people to disconnect from their online presence. The following statement also supports this: "when I'm in nature, I'm able to fully disconnect from the digital world".

To the question of when do **young people feel more included/connected in digital youth work activities,** the respondents asserted that this is the case when:

- Participants choose to have their **cameras open** (which is a paradox given that many young people stated that they do not feel comfortable expressing themselves with video and the youth workers stressed the issue of connecting with the participants when the cameras are not open)
- The facilitators use **ice-breaking exercises** at the beginning of the activities.
- Participants **work in small groups**; the setting is collaborative, and everybody is asked to contribute.
- Setting **common goals** and planning activities (have a say in how the process runs)
- **They can express emotions** and share ideas and opinions (this need reflects the answers calling for more connection at a personal/emotional level).
- Counselling, emotional support, **and the support of the trainers** is provided during the online activities.
- **Real-life experiences** to feel welcome are organised, and "real" talk to express themselves and feel included within a group is facilitated.

In addition to this, a question on the **issues regarding the access to digital youth work activities** was included in the guide. The respondents identified the following issues:

- While many respondents affirmed that they did not encounter any issues accessing digital youth work, in about 40% of the answers identified at least one difficulty or more.
- Type of issues faced: lack of Internet connectivity, lack of equipment, lack of information about activities for young people, lack of time, lack of digital skills, loss of interest during activities either because there was no interaction or because it was not a topic of interest or because of (digital) fatigue.
- When it comes to time and motivation for digital youth work, school was already taking up a lot of time leaving little to no engagement in other activities, according to some respondents. Having a lack of motivation was mentioned in several interviews.
- While speaking about the lack of interactivity of the activities online, the young people mentioned that it's difficult for them to "immerse" themselves in the event and very few activities have private rooms where you can connect easier to the other participants.

While the most common answer to this question was related to the technical issues (internet and devices), the access to digital youth work was also seen from the perspective of motivation and interest. When these two elements were at low levels or missing, they affected the willingness to take part and /or stay engaged in digital youth work activities.

One of the questions addressed in the interviews with the young people was about **the preferred environment to express oneself (online or offline).** The conclusions drawn from the discussions reveal that:

- Most young people feel more comfortable **expressing themselves in the offline environment**, due to being more able to share emotions and see the reactions of others.
- Many young people said that they **are less distracted** in the offline environment and can **concentrate more** on the activity taking part in.
- Offline it's much easier to **have difficult conversations** and reach common agreements.
- In offline communication, there is a **focus on empathy**, authentic communication, and bonding.
- Offline is also preferred because it allows them to **observe body language** and have eye contact.
- The **online environment** was preferred by those who said it's **easier/safer to communicate** with unknown people.
- The **online space was mostly associated with negative emotions** (e.g., the polarization on social media, the harmful comments)
- The **online environment** was also selected by those who said **it's easier to develop certain skills**/enrol to new training.
- Another positive aspect of the **online environment** is that it offers you **time/space to think before saying something.**

Following this, another question was addressed in relation to **the participation in online or offline youth activities.** The answers offered by the respondents reflect the following conclusions:

- Comparing participation in online and offline youth activities, young people shared differing opinions - on one hand they experienced communication challenges reading the online settings (this conclusion is drawn from other questions as well), on the other - they mentioned the practical benefits and opportunities of attending digital activities.
- A couple of those who prefer online youth activities argue that this is the case due to social anxiety. For them it's easier to attend remotely, as they only depend on a Wi-Fi connection and a device. However, some that prefer online activities acknowledge that at times it's not as fulfilling as face-to-face youth work.
- For certain respondents, the offline environment was the first choice due to real communication, empathy, and authenticity of the connection. Seeing the other participants, better communication and getting more comfortable in a shorter time made the offline experience more pleasant, effective, and efficient. In addition to this, young people argue that they require time off from the screens after long exposure to them, as they appreciate the value of one-on-one interactions.

- One last category specified that they prefer a certain environment according to the type of activity. Offline activities are preferred for better communication and interaction experiences, while online activities (such as enrolling for an online course) save time, effort, and money.

The last question addressed in this category was related to the **type of support needed by young people to adapt to changes related to digital inclusion, safety, and wellbeing:**

- The need for m**ore information** on how different platforms work (how is data processed and stored, etc.) and better regulation regarding privacy.
- Young people asked for **predictability in the online environment**, especially when it comes to children, on security protocols, notifications in case somebody had access to someone else's data, as well as permissions on recording options.
- **Workshops and learning opportunities about digital safety** (the information should reach underprivileged individuals who are unable to use modern technologies).
- Support for **digital literacy and mental health assistance** (some interviewees felt they would need support in the mental health field because online work could become more tiring and stressful than the offline one).
- **Personalised activities related to digital wellbeing** (how to keep a healthy lifestyle in situations where all the work is done indoors, in front of the screens).
- Private and/or group sessions about **online addictions** (also mental, emotional support and understanding from the older generation are vital).
- **Improved access to counselling and mentoring** (free access to vulnerable children and young people).
- **The increased role of the parents** in terms of education on these issues, especially in relation to children.
- More programmes fostering **critical thinking and media literacy** (mostly on topics related to fake news, hate speech and anonymity, responsibility in the digital era).

5. What can you use in your strategy or practice?

This section presents the main findings from the public survey, which was **answered by 326 people anonymously**. The data collected can be useful for designing new activities, updating the current ones, or evaluating the past activities as the responses show the implications of the pandemic for the online presence of the participants. The survey was applied between 18 and 31 January 2022 and collected answers mostly from young people (48.5%), youth workers (38.3%), volunteers (37.1%) and teachers (14.4%).

As most of the respondents live in Romania (38.34%), Bulgaria (19.63%), Greece (15.33%), and the United Kingdom (6.44%) **the research is highly relevant for Central and Eastern Europe and for Southern Europe** (regions where these topics have been less researched). Among those who answered, 60.40% are female and 30.98% are male participants. The geographical distribution is less equitable than in the case of the interviews: 90.49% live in urban areas and 9.51% live in rural areas.

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At least **1/4 of the respondents (28.53%) to the public survey affirmed have faced/are facing one or more types of vulnerabilities/obstacles**, thus offering relevant insights on the implications of the pandemic for vulnerable people.

Also, the survey **adds data to the information extracted from the interviews**, by examining: the amount of time spent online, the most used online platforms/apps, reasons for being online, enjoying/feeling bad the/about the time spent online, changes observed in the last two years in their online presence, the impact of the pandemic on key areas of their life, encountering different risky/challenging online situations, digital trends and technologies and their level of knowledge on these topics, competencies that should be developed to face those trends, the role of the youth workers.

The first question addressed was **how much time the respondents spend online each day**. The most common answer was 3-5 hours (34.4%), followed by 5-7 hours (27%), more than 7 hours (20.6%), and 1-3 hours (18.1%). Given that 1/5 of the respondents spend more than 7 hours per day being online this requires special attention, especially in relation to digital safety and wellbeing.

The next question submitted was regarding the **online platforms/channels/apps used the most during the pandemic**. This item had multiple answers to choose from and the respondents ranked Instagram (68.7%), YouTube (63.2%), Facebook (54.9%), and Messenger (54.3%) in the first place. The next in line were WhatsApp (52.8%), Zoom (41.4%), TikTok (28.8%), and Google Meet (24.5%).

During the virtual laboratory, a few comments received were focused on the **low percentage of TikTok users** (given that the app reached such a broad audience during the pandemic). One possible explanation for having Instagram in the top position and TikTok on the lower rank might have to do with the reasons and contexts for using the app. For instance, during the interviews, Instagram was seen by some of the youth workers as easier/ familiar to reach young people. Also, another possible explanation for ranking Instagram first in this list might have to do with the gender of the respondents (predominantly female).

To the question **identifying the main reasons for being online**, the respondents had multiple answers to choose from. The results came as follows: **to connect with friends** (74.5%) - which also explains the answers received in the interviews, where both youth workers and young people spoke about the stringent need to connect with others; **for entertainment** (64.7%); **to relax** (54.6%); **for studying** (54.3%) - many of the respondents for this public survey are either high school students or university students; **for working** (52.8%); **to play video games** (16.9%) - might be explained since there are fewer male respondents to this public survey; for doing digital youth work (15%).

Furthermore, the respondents were **asked if they enjoy spending time online.** The purpose of this query was to look at the (positive) emotion associated with spending time online. The answers offered by the participants show the following results:

- 66% said that they sometimes enjoy spending time online
- 18.7% affirmed they always enjoy spending time online

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- 9.8% are not sure if they enjoy spending time online.

In terms of the aspects enjoyed the most when spending time online, the top scores were:

- 70% enjoy accessing news information about the things that interest them.
- 69% enjoy being in contact with other people through social media.
- 61.3% enjoy watching movies, videos, and series.
- 44.2% enjoy watching tutorials for learning new skills.
- 36% enjoy discovering trends/updates about the world we live in.
- 21.2% enjoy having the means to help/support other people.

One observation that can be made in this case is related to enjoying being in contact with other people. While this need has been expressed in several other cases as being the most important one, in this question being in contact with others ranks as second (but very close to the first one which implies a rather individual activity).

Continuing with the survey, the respondents were asked **if they ever feel bad when spending time online.** The purpose of this question was to look at the (negative) emotion associated with spending time online. The results show the following:

- 69% said that they sometimes feel bad when spending time online.
- 16.9% affirmed they don't feel bad when spending time online.
- 9.8% are not sure if they ever feel bad when spending time online.

Comparing these results to the question on enjoying time online, we can observe that the percentage of those feeling sometimes bad is a little higher than in the first case. This might also explain the fact that while spending time online has both advantages and disadvantages it can also trigger both positive and negative emotions. From a research point of view, further analysis is needed on how the time spent online can be good and bad at the same time and what kind of an impact this has for the mental health of the user.

On the causes for feeling bad when spending time online, the top scores (multiple answers to choose from) are:

- 64.4% said that they are mostly losing track of time when being online.
- 51.2% responded that they are sitting instead of being physically active.
- 36.5% answered that spending time online influences their physical health (eyesight, back pain, etc.).
- 28.8% affirmed they don't know how to set boundaries for their online time.
- 24.8% talked about the influence on their mental health (anxieties, bad sleep, online addiction).
- 23.9% said that the content often has no meaning.

Further on, the participants to the survey were inquired about the **positive changes observed in their online activities in the past 2 years.** Most of the answers showed the following results:

- **They became aware** of the time spent online and set limitations (this answer can be correlated to the fact some platforms/apps developed time counters and introduced information about digital wellbeing).
- **Started to learn new things** and build new hobbies/habits (which was also seen in the answers to the interviews with the young people).
- Feeling **more relaxed when having to talk online** (easier to express oneself).
- **Finding new or improving personal connections** (more time spent communicating with geographically distant friends or relatives).
- **Realising the value of having people around**/a community to be a part of.
- **Being more aware** of the issues from the community.
- **Work more** on personal and professional development.
- **Learn how to use new platforms** and/or digital tools.

In terms of the **negative changes observed in their online activities in the past 2 years,** the respondents usually spoke about:

- **More screen time** (to escape real life issues or bad news/get distracted) than real lifetime.
- **Losing track of time online** (sometimes on a singular platform/app, sometimes switching between scrolling on more platforms/apps).
- **Fewer boundaries** (regarding the online connections).
- **Lack of work-life balance** (often being connected and available).
- **Higher anxiety** (due to losing time online, not doing physical activity, not seeing family members or friends, etc.).
- **Having more insecurities** and/or **becoming more antisocial.**
- **Feeling addicted** to online platforms/apps.
- **Attention span** got shorter/procrastinate more.

The next part of the survey assessed the impact of the pandemic on key areas in the lives of the respondents (Figure 8)**.** The domains analysed were mental health, digital wellbeing, digital safety, personal and professional life. This question offered options to measure the impact: positive, negative and no impact. The answers received:

- **Generally negative impact on their mental health** (this answer can also be explained through the remarks made during the interviews with the youth workers and the young people that associated negative effects of the pandemic for the mental health)
- **Positive or negative impact on their digital wellbeing** (the difference between the two categories is rather low, which can also explain the dichotomy of the answers received to the questions of enjoying/feeling bad about the time spent online).
- **Generally, no impact or mostly positive impact on their digital safety** (putting this in relation to the answers from the interviews, we can observe that the respondents mostly feel in charge of their level of digital safety).
- **Mostly negative impact on their personal life** (which can relate to the answers to the interviews regarding the need to connect with others and the high levels of feeling alone/isolated during the pandemic).

- **Mostly positive impact on their professional life** (which can be tied to the advantage of working from home in many cases or having the possibility to apply to remote jobs which was not a common option before the pandemic).
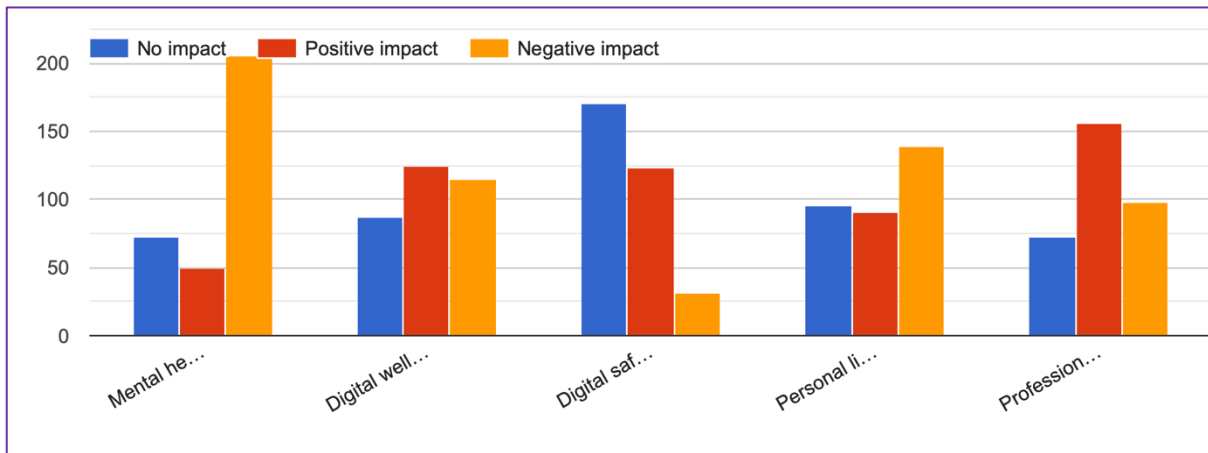

Figure 8. Respondents rating the impact of the pandemic on key areas

For a clearer understanding of this evaluation, the respondents have also shared explanations of how they rated these items:

- "After 1 year of pandemic, I came out seemingly as having in no way developed as I, a teen, think should have developed in normal conditions for my then particular age and placing in life."
- "I don't know, this pandemic period destroyed my skills in communication with the outside world but also, I adapted some skills to online public speaking."
- "The past two years certainly had more of a positive impact on my personal life, specifically in the relationship with myself."
- "I wasn't aware of how much I needed to be around other people until I couldn't be around other people."
- "I think that the pandemic had a positive impact on my personal life because I lost touch with people that used to drag me down and got closer to the ones that truly cared about me and to my family as well."
- "Regarding the job, I now work from home with the possibility of working remotely, so personally for me, this is a positive impact as I no longer waste time commuting and I can take meaningful breaks during work tasks."
- "My work has been affected because it changed so much that I am facing unemployment for the first time in my life. The organisation that I work in has stopped doing the same kind of work as before since that has become impossible."

For some respondents it was difficult to rate the impact of the pandemic in just one way: "I wish there was both negative and positive impact because most of my answers would be like that." This type of answer shows the need to further investigate how the pandemic affected key areas in people's lives and to what extent a change can be considered to have produced a positive or a negative outcome.

Continuing with the survey, a question about **the capacity to detect fake news/protect privacy/deal with exclusion/overcome digital fatigue/deal with** cyberbullying was addressed (Figure 9). This question offered options to rate one's capacity: low, moderate, high or don't know / not sure. The answers provided might reflect desirable answers:

- **Generally high capacity to detect fake news** (this can be explained in relation to the participation in youth activities; both youth workers and young people affirmed that one of the topics addressed in digital youth work during the pandemic was focused on understanding and countering fake news).
- **Mostly high or moderate capacity to protect the privacy and be safe online** (correlating this answer with the results of the interviews, we can see that while many of the respondents tend to evaluate their capacity as being high, almost 40% of the answers consider having a moderate capacity thus requiring more training and information on this topic).
- **Generally moderate capacity to deal with digital exclusion** (the high percentage illustrating a moderate capacity might have to do with the fact that digital exclusion is a rather new concept and as we have observed during the interviews there aren't many practices/measures in place to work on digital inclusion).
- **Generally moderate capacity to overcome digital fatigue and digital stress** (this issue emerged as a key finding in the research, thus also explaining the significant percentage of respondents who consider having a low capacity to deal with digital fatigue/stress).
- **Mostly moderate or high capacity to deal with hate or cyberbullying** (as in the first case, this can be explained in relation to the participation in youth activities).
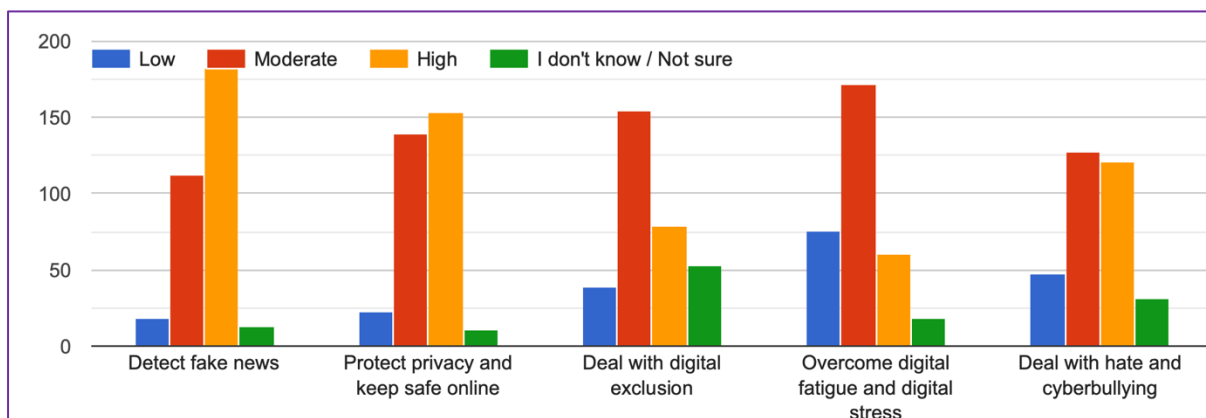
Figure 9. The respondents evaluated their capacity to face different negative online events

In addition to this, the participants in the survey were questioned **how often they encountered the following situations during the pandemic**: cyberbullying, digital fatigue, digital stress, online disinhibition, false information, digital exclusion, violations of privacy, hacking, hate speech and harmful online challenges (Table 1). The frequencies identified can also explain the degrees associated to the previous question about competencies:

Type of situation	Frequency (never)	Frequency (rarely)	Frequency (sometimes)	Frequency (often)
Cyberbullying (types of online harassment)	56.13%	24.23%	15.3%	4.60%
Digital fatigue (about the time spent online)	6.75%	18.40	42.02%	32.82%
Digital stress (caused by online interactions)	22.39%	30.98%	33.13%	13.50%
Online disinhibition (saying/doing things that you would not normally do in real life)	47.85%	24.85%	20.25%	7.06%
False information (misinformation or disinformation)	15.95%	25.15%	30.37%	28.53%
Digital exclusion (people removed from online interactions)	34.66%	35.58%	22.70%	7.06%
Violations of privacy / confidentiality	48.16%	29.75%	17.48%	4.60%
Hacking (illegal access to one's account)	68.10%	20.55%	7.98%	3.37%
Hate speech (messages that incite to violence, discrimination, animosity)	31.60%	21.78%	25.77%	20.86%
Harmful online challenges	43.56%	26.27%	22.39%	7.98%

Table 1. How often have the respondents encountered different situations during the pandemic?

Out of the situations examined by the respondents, only two (cyberbullying and hacking) are indicated with a 50% plus frequency for never encountered. However, in the case of cyberbullying **the percentage of those who encountered this situation rarely or sometimes amounts to almost 40%**.

In the case of digital fatigue, digital stress, and false information the most common frequency selected by the respondents is sometimes which indicates that these situations are common. The frequency associated with digital fatigue is worrisome, with **74.84% affirming that they have faced this situation sometimes or often**. In addition to this, digital stress was encountered by **64.11% of the respondents either rarely or sometimes**.

The added percentages for **digital exclusion** (35.58% for rarely encountered and 22.70% for sometimes facing this situation) indicate the need to work on this subject and ensure basic practices for digital inclusion, especially in youth work activities.

In the case of misinformation or disinformation situations, **58.9% of the respondents confirm** that they have encountered it sometimes or often. Another percentage worth looking in depth is that of hate speech, with **46,63% of the respondents indicating** they met this situation sometimes or often. Special attention in youth activities should also be given to

understanding and tackling online disinhibition, harmful online challenges, and violations of privacy/confidentiality.

To understand **how respondents perceive digital trends and new technologies**, they were asked to rate **their level of knowledge on a series of related topics** (Table 2). The subjects have been selected from the latest forecast reports from the European Union's institutions and in direct relation to the newest strategies for developing digital competencies among the European citizens.

Topic	Not familiar with	Slightly familiar with	Highly familiar with
Inhumane technology	59.51%	32.82%	7.67%
Metaverse (an overlap of our digital and physical life)	39.88%	49.08%	11.04
Artificial intelligence (AI)	21.47%	51.84%	26.69%
Deep Fakes	51.53%	30.06%	18.40%
Internet of Behaviours (IoB)	66.87%	25.77%	7.36%
Internet of Things (IoT)	57.67%	31.60%	10.74%
Facial recognition algorithms	25.15%	49.08%	25.77%
Smart eyewear	47.85%	38.65%	13.50%
Working/interacting with robots	41.72%	43.25%	15.03%
Hyperconnectivity	58.59%	32.82%	8.59%

Table 2. Level of knowledge on different digital trends and new technologies

The answers provided to this question show that **most of the participants are not familiar with topics such as inhumane technology, deep fakes, Internet of Behaviours, Internet of Things, and hyperconnectivity**. In the case of the metaverse, artificial Intelligence, facial recognition algorithms and working/interacting with robots, many respondents affirmed they are slightly familiar with these topics. The only two topics where 1 in 4 respondents evaluate themselves as highly familiar are artificial intelligence and facial recognition algorithms.

Considering the level of familiarity attributed to these digital trends and new technologies that are expected to change the way society will look in the upcoming years, there is a stringent need to allocate more time and resources to training, information, and awareness. While many youth workers might not understand the relevance of these topics for the youth activities they carry out, the effects of these trends and new technologies could be visible in a couple of years on matters related to digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion.

One of the last subjects included in the survey was about **the main competencies (knowledge, skills, attitude/behaviour/values) a young person should develop in the next few years**. The first ranked competencies related to mental health care (62%), critical thinking (57.7%), and active learning (51.2%). The list continues with: problem solving and efficient communication (47.5%), self-regulation and self-awareness (40.2%), flexibility and adaptability (39.9%), work-life balance (39.6%), digital literacy (35.3%), and growth mindset (29.4%).

The last part of the survey looked **at the assistance, help, support needed to feel more safe, healthy, and included in the digital world.** In this sense, the answers offered by the respondents tackle either specific issues or point in the direction of requesting broader support from non-governmental organisations, digital platforms, apps, or public institutions. While there were a couple of respondents affirming that they do not require assistance, as they are aware of what to do, the results of this section show that there is a need for:

- Knowledge about the latest digital trends and technologies, how to be safer and to create safe environments for others.
- Mental health care (if possible, offered by professionals).
- Education about fake news and hate speech.
- Training, workshops, and other informal/non-formal learning experiences.
- Guidance and counselling.
- Access to organisations that offer programmes on these subjects.
- Reminders on social platforms to be more active in real life.
- Ways to control anxiet related to the digital world.
- Free VPNs and/or other digital tools that ensure a good level of digital safety.
- Being part of a community where these issues are discussed.
- Support from/for parents and teachers that need to better understand the characteristics of the digital world.
- Regulations about privacy, data storage, etc.

6. Recommendations

Based on the main findings presented in this report, we developed a series of recommendations for nongovernmental organisations, tech companies and policymakers. The purpose of these proposals is to advance the topic of digital youth work and to raise awareness about digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion. The aim of this report is to contribute to shaping digital inclusion and safety in a post-pandemic world by reaching out to all relevant stakeholders and presenting them with the perspectives collected in the interviews and the public survey.

A. For organisations

1. *Develop a common understanding of digital youth work in your organisation*

Facilitate regular discussions in your organisation about how you view digital youth work, which are the learning objectives you seek to achieve with your beneficiaries, and what can be updated based on your previous experiences.

Pro tip: start by evaluating how digital youth work evolved within your organisation since March 2020.

2. *Cultivate a common understanding of digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion in your organisation*

Building on the previous idea, host discussions with the youth workers from your organisation about these concepts and observe how they are understood and put into practice in youth activities.

Pro tip: make a brief analysis on the use of these concepts in the work of your organisation, starting from the current situation e.g., "we don't currently work with digital safety topics, but we would be interested to do so".

3. *Map the practices from your organisation and identify what can be done in terms of digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion*

Run an inventory in your organisation and map all the practices you currently have in use; try to identify if some of these practices can be updated with digital safety, wellbeing and inclusion references or it would be more useful to develop specific practices related to these topics.

Pro tip: create individual practices about digital safety, wellbeing and inclusion and share them with all the members of the organisation.

4. *Look at the current and future trends impacting/have the potential to impact the work of your organisation*

Discuss with the members of the board about current and future trends that might impact the work of your organisation and evaluate which one of them is most likely to produce changes in how you work in the organisation.

Pro tip: monitor the events happening outside of your organisation and assess regularly how the work of your organisation can be transformed by them.

5. *Gather data about your digital youth work*

Conduct interviews or apply surveys to gather data about the activities carried out/programs implemented and identify how beneficiaries evaluate their effectiveness, relevance, and quality.

Pro tip: host peer discussions to offer the beneficiaries a say in how the activities / programs should be created and/or updated.

6. *Use the findings of this report to level up your organisation*

Discuss with the members of your organisation about this report and identify how to apply the main findings to upgrade your organisation.

Pro tip: go to the previous section and identify one or two situations encountered by the respondents to the public survey that connects to the activity of your organisation. Develop a methodology to tackle that situation in a workshop and start upgrading the competencies of your beneficiaries.

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7. *Build standards around digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion*

Starting with this report, research and think about minimal conditions needed to develop standards on the above-mentioned topics.

Pro tip: work together with organisations on this process and start assessing what you can do to develop the minimal conditions for creating this list of standards. You can start from the basics such as creating a standard for ensuring digital safety in youth organisations.

B. For tech companies (platforms, apps, etc.)

1. *Present your platform/app as user friendly for digital youth work*

In this report, we showed examples of digital youth work carried out from March 2020 onwards. Usually, they require interactivity, creativity, privacy and a good connection between the youth workers and the young people. Showcase your platform/app as user-friendly for digital youth work by emphasising the core elements that are needed in working with individuals, small or large groups.

Pro tip: Create a page on your platform/app where you talk about the functions you offer for digital youth work. Start with the basics: how can the users interact within the platform/app, what kind of content can be shared, how can they work in small groups, and what kind of functions are available for digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion.

2. *Include youth workers in the list of discounts for education providers*

Mention youth workers in the description of discounts offered to teachers. The youth workers support the development of the soft and digital skills of young people, and they need a boost in accessing platforms that can be used for digital youth work.

Pro tip: by specifically writing youth workers in the description of the discount offered, you contribute to raising awareness about non formal education and you associate your brand with a forward-looking vision about the professional and personal development of your users.

3. *Develop a digital wellbeing policy for your users*

Add information on your platform/app about the digital wellbeing of the user. Create awareness about the quantity and quality of the time spent online and ensure a greater level of transparency for your users. Consider including an option for the user to set a timer for their time spent on the platform/app and include the possibility to alert the user when they reach the time limit. Analyse the option to send notifications to the user about doing some physical exercise after a certain amount of time spent online.

Pro tip: add a digital wellbeing menu/button in the settings so that each user can easily access their data. Work with non-governmental organisations on developing this policy and make sure that the mental health of young people is considered.

4. Develop a digital safety policy for your users

Add information on your platform/app about the digital safety of the user. Create awareness about the privacy and safety of the time spent online and ensure a greater level of transparency for your users. Include information for users on how to counter cyberbullying, violation of privacy/confidentiality, etc, and ensure contact details (support) for the users affected by these types of issues.

Pro tip: add a digital safety button/menu in the settings so that each user can easily access their data. Work with non-governmental organisations on developing this policy and make sure that the risks associated with the online activity on your platform of the user are tackled.

5. Design new interactions functions for users (e.g., avatars for videos)

The young people we interviewed shared that they would like to have more interaction in the online youth activities they take part in, but they are afraid to open their camera due to the fear of being judged, recorded, or to social anxiety. If you are a video-conferencing platform, consider including the function of setting up an avatar that would allow the user to participate with their camera open, but without disclosing personal information.

Pro tip: include the avatars in the menu with the virtual background and video filters.

C. For policy makers

1. Recognize the importance of digital youth work

Within this report, we revealed that youth workers had to use their resources to reach young people during the pandemic and organise youth activities. While formal education is a central pillar for the personal and professional development of the individual, non-formal education should be seen as complementary by the public authorities. In this regard, it is essential to recognize the importance of digital youth work alongside online education and to support the youth activities with adequate resources.

Pro tip: include digital youth work in the strategic documents targeting youth policies.

2. Support the development of standards on digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion

Alongside nongovernmental organisations, provide input and support the creation of standards related to these key areas in digital youth work. Facilitate and promote the cooperation between organisations and support with adequate funding for the creation of standards in this field.

Pro tip: gather information from the nongovernmental organisations about practices on digital safety, wellbeing and inclusion, and reference them in the discussions on creating the standards.

   3. *Support the creation of digital youth work hubs*

The youth workers are stressing the need to access infrastructure (including devices) to continue doing digital youth work. Given the increasing importance of establishing authentic connections and offering qualitative learning opportunities to young people, it would be of great support to finance the creation of digital youth work hubs. In this sense, youth workers could develop networks and partnerships for the public benefit and the young people could have access to creative and interactive places nearby them that could help them advance their soft and digital skills.

Pro tip: run a needs assessment among nongovernmental organisations on the topic of creating digital youth work hubs.

7. Conclusions

This research process started with the aim of identifying emerging trends and changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic for digital inclusion, safety, and wellbeing among youth workers and young people. To achieve this goal, we interviewed 121 youth workers and young people from different European countries and applied a public survey to which we received 326 answers. In the end, we learnt about how digital youth work evolved during the pandemic, which are the practices related to digital safety, wellbeing, and inclusion and which are the changes, and the emerging trends brought by the pandemic.

By presenting the main findings in this report, we sought to offer sharable insights that can be used by nongovernmental organisations, tech companies, and policy makers in advancing their youth agenda. Digital youth work played an important role during the pandemic in creating a sense of community, fostering connections, and facilitating non-formal learning. The youth workers used their own resources to reach vulnerable youth and to make digital inclusion a reality. In addition to this, digital safety, and digital wellbeing gained traction and more nongovernmental organisations started to implement related activities and projects.

The pandemic forced people and organisations to change. We observed from the research carried out that it's very difficult to label a change as being solely positive or negative. For instance, most of the participants in this research spoke about the negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health, but also acknowledged the emergence of digital wellbeing as a common topic in discussions and activities.

Considering that one of the major changes that occurred during the pandemic was related to an increase in the time spent online, the need to disconnect from the online environment became prevalent. The youth workers should pay close attention to the needs of the young people on this matter and create learning opportunities that foster safe and healthy use of technology. Usually, young people associate the online environment with both positive and

negative emotions, thus raising the question on what type of competencies should be developed to control a process that is both good and bad.

Lastly, we have observed that the participants of the research aren't familiar with the digital trends and new technologies that are expected to shape society in the following years. Given this, we argue in favour of more attention, resources, and access allocated to nongovernmental organisations to harness the benefits of digital developments and to counter the risks associated. Both the youth workers and the young people need modern learning contexts to enhance their digital competencies and to become more digitally literate.

"I hope that, in the future, these aspects will be more and more talked about, because they are very important for the young generations of today, and also for the future generations." - a participant in the research.

8. Apply the findings of this research for Erasmus+ funding

This research was possible due to the grant received through the Erasmus+ Programme, Key Action 2 (KA2) - Cooperation among organisations and institutions. In the last section of the report, information on Erasmus+ is included and details on how you can use the findings of this research to apply for funding are provided.

The 2022 call for proposals states that *"Any public or private body active in the fields of education, training, youth and sport may apply for funding within the Erasmus+ Programme. In addition, groups of young people who are active in youth work, but not necessarily in the context of a youth organisation, may apply for funding for learning mobility of young people and youth workers, youth participation activities and DiscoverEU inclusion action."*

Erasmus+ offers funding for young people, non-governmental organisations, teachers, and educational institutions on the following areas:

- **Key Action 1 (KA1) – Learning mobility of individuals** (type of activities supported: mobility of individuals in the fields of education, training and youth, youth participation, inclusion and virtual exchanges in higher education and youth).
- **Key Action 2 (KA2) - Cooperation among organisations and institutions** (types of activities supported: partnerships for cooperation, partnerships for excellence, partnerships for innovation, capacity building, in higher education, vocational education and training, youth and sport, not-for-profit European sport events).
- **Key Action 3 (KA3) - Support to policy development and cooperation.**
- **Jean Monnet actions** (in the field of higher education and the fields of education and training).

More details about the Erasmus+ funding can be accessed here: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu.

Each programming period has its own priorities. For the 2021-2027 period, Erasmus+ seeks to address the following priorities: inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, environment and the fight against climate change, and participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement. In terms of digital transformation, Erasmus+ is wisely linked to the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), and the aim of the programme is to support learners, educators, young people, youth workers and organisations in becoming active actors in the digital transformation process.

One of the opportunities for non-governmental organisations in this programming period is to apply with projects that tackle digital transformation. How can the findings of this report be used in that sense? Start from here:

- **Train the youth workers on how to respond to the needs of young people concerning their participation in the online, hybrid and offline environments** (you can either quote the research findings from this report or draft your own survey based on our steps).
  - Apply with a KA1 project (learning mobility), by gathering partners from different European countries to address these needs.
- **Identify needs concerning the evolution of digital youth work** (you can either cite our references or use the information to make assessments in your community).
  - Apply with a KA2 project (cooperation), while identifying partners from different fields (e.g., youth centres, youth NGOs, educational institutions).
- **Identify gaps and challenges regarding the digitalisation of non-governmental organisation** (we have stated in this report that the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the digitalisation of youth organisations; check this finding against the reality from your own community and search for challenges that can be tackled through an Erasmus+ project).
  - Apply for a KA3 funding and engage with the local, national, and European authorities on these matters.
- **Develop a training agenda based on the digital trends and new technologies** young people and youth workers are not familiar with (our research shows that most of the young people and youth workers are not familiar to the major digital trends that are set to impact the future).
  - Apply for a KA1 funding with a training on deep fakes (for example) and identify ways to deal with this subject in youth activities.
- **Research the challenge of receiving and giving feedback in online or hybrid learning contexts and develop new methodologies** (our report has highlighted that one of the major difficulties for the youth workers was to receive feedback during their online and hybrid learning situations)**.**
  - Apply for a KA2 funding with a cooperation project that involves non-governmental organisations and educational institutions from different European countries.
- **Shape digital inclusion, safety, and wellbeing with policymakers** (this report emphasis the implications of the pandemic for the three areas and raises awareness on the necessity to develop specific procedures when working with young people).
  - Apply for a KA3 funding and engage with the local, national, and European authorities on these matters.