Mapping the Financial and Time loss Impact of Gaming and Social Media on Young People with Additional Needs

Project Outcome Report

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Project “FITING4YOU”: Mapping the FInancial and Time loss Impact of gamiNG and social media on YOUng people with special needs.

Project Number: 2023-3-DE04-KA210-YOU-000175113

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1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale and Goals

In recent years, the influence of digital gaming and social media on young people has grown exponentially, reshaping how they spend their time, interact socially, and manage their finances. While much attention has been given to digital competence and online safety for young people in general, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific impacts on young people with additional needs—particularly regarding financial and time-related consequences. The FITING4YOU project addresses this critical and underexplored issue.

This project was launched to investigate how much time and money youth with additional needs spend on digital gaming, social channels, and online influencers. These young people often face unique vulnerabilities—such as higher susceptibility to the influence of digital role models and limited understanding of financial risks—which can result in substantial losses of both time and money.

1.2 Target Groups

The target groups for this project includes professionals working with youth with additional needs—such as youth workers, educators, school social workers, and trainers—who often lack the up-to-date knowledge and tools needed to understand and effectively support their target audience in navigating the digital world. The project also targets young people with additional needs, including those with intellectual and emotional impairments, as well as parents, caregivers, and policy makers.

1.3 Project, Contact and Funding

FITING4YOU is a collaboration between three European partners:

• Jugendförderverein Parchim/Lübz e.V. (Germany) – the coordinating institution with a long-standing commitment to development and integration of marginalised youth: https://www.jfv-pch.de/

• MMT Academics (Germany) – an expert organization in financial literacy and digital risk prevention: https://www.mmt-academics.de/ and

• Future in Perspective Ltd. (Ireland) – a creative, media-savvy partner with strong experience in youth-focused education and community engagement: https://futureinperspective.com/ .

The project name is “Mapping the Financial and Time loss Impact of gamING and social media on YOUng people with special needs” or “FITING4YOU” for short. It is co-funded by Erasmus+ under the project number 2023-3-DE04-KA210-YOU-000175113 with the runtime 01/05/2024-30/04/2025.

Please contact fiting4you@euplus-project.eu for more information on the project and its partners.

1.4 Methodology and Limitations

Throughout the project, partners conducted desk research, interviews with youth, and interactive workshops to collect qualitative and quantitative data on digital behaviours, financial patterns, and time

use. The desk research had both an EU-wide perspective as well as in-depth insight from Germany and Ireland. Interviews and workshop with youth were conducted in Ireland and in Germany.

In line with the project's objective to explore an under-researched and complex issue in depth, the methodological approach prioritised qualitative richness and contextual understanding over large-scale data collection. Rather than aiming for broad representativeness through high participant numbers, the research design focused on in-depth engagement with a smaller number of participants from the target group—young people with additional needs. This allowed for a nuanced exploration of individual experiences, perceptions, and behaviours in relation to gaming, social media, and associated financial and time investments.

This qualitative emphasis enabled the identification of patterns, influences, and vulnerabilities that might have remained obscured in a more superficial or quantitatively driven study. However, this strength also presents a methodological limitation: while the insights are rich and highly relevant for practice-oriented contexts, they are not statistically generalisable to the wider population of young people with additional needs or youth at large. The findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative and exploratory rather than conclusive, with the potential to inform further research, policy development, and targeted educational strategies.

In total, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with young people with additional needs in Germany and 10 in Ireland. Based on desk research and the interview findings, workshops with the youth target group were conducted in Ireland and Germany to assess the findings and to be able to draw conclusions and make recommendations for the target groups. There was one workshop with twelve participants in Ireland and two workshops with eight participants each in Germany, summing up to a total of 28 workshop participants. There was a balanced gender and age distribution. Participants were between 14 and 30 years of age.

It is important to acknowledge that, while clear guidelines and frameworks were established for the studies conducted in Germany and Ireland, the interviews and workshops were conducted in differing ways by the respective organisations. The methods were adapted to suit the needs of the specific groups and individuals.

In some respects, the outcomes between Germany and Ireland differed notably. While such variations may reflect genuine cross-national differences, they are also likely, at least in part, to result from individual characteristics and circumstances of the participants. For instance, many participants in the German cohort lived at a considerable distance from their schools and regularly commuted via public transport. It is therefore reasonable to assume that their higher levels of online activity during travel time may differ from those of participants with shorter or no commutes. The findings may also have been influenced by the relative sample sizes: recruiting interview participants in Ireland proved more challenging, resulting in a smaller group (n=10) compared to the German sample (n=20). This disparity may have limited the comparability of the two national datasets. The interviews furthermore were conducted in a group setting in Ireland whereas in Germany, it was possible to conduct the interviews individually or in groups of two to five individuals. The individual approach in Germany has led to more depth and possibly also to more open answers.

Nevertheless, clear trends emerged from both countries both separately and combined, and the limitations described above do not diminish the overall informative value of the research outcomes.

Unless otherwise stated, the findings in this report are drawn from the research, interview and workshop reports listed in the annex.

1.5 Results and Their Availability

This final report presents the consolidated findings of our research. It is complemented by three fact sheets with recommendations for (1) youth, (2) parents and educators and (3) policy makers. The materials are available in English and German on partner websites and on EPALE.

For in-depth information of the results from desk research, interviews, and workshops, see reports listed in the annex. To protect the privacy of the participants, only data conforming with prevalent data protection policies have been made available.

2 Insights Gathered on Gaming

2.1 Gaming Behaviour and Gaming Types Used

Approximately two-thirds of the European population between the ages of 9 and 64 engage in online gaming, with a considerable proportion playing on a daily basis. These general trends were also observed within our target group. Whereas some do not game at all, many do and those who do, do so often and for extended periods of time.

Consistent with broader patterns, smartphones emerged as the primary gaming device among participants, followed by desktop computers and gaming consoles. Moreover, a gender disparity was evident, with male participants demonstrating higher levels of gaming activity than their female counterparts.

There is a wide range of different game types being played:

- Massively Multiplayer Online Games, such as World of Warcraft
- Multiplayer Online Battle Arena, such as League of Legends
- Shooter Games, such as Call of Duty
- Battle Royale (Survival-based games), such as Fortnite.
- Real-Time Strategy, such as Age of Empires
- Role-Playing Games / Action RPGs. Examples: Genshin Impact
- Simulation / Sandbox Games (Open-ended games simulating real-world or fantastical systems). Examples: The Sims and Minecraft
- Casual and Social Games, such as Candy Crush Saga and FarmVille

A noticeable trend emerged in our study regarding gendered preferences in game types: male participants tended to gravitate towards more violent genres, such as shooter and battle games, while female participants more frequently engaged with casual or simulation-based games. There are studies suggesting that games with violent content are connected to offline aggressive behaviour. When looking at statistical evaluations of popular game types in the European youth segment, it was clear that our

target group were less into games that involve strategic thinking or team efforts than the youth segment in general.

In addition, the game types youth with additional needs choose are highly frequency with monetisation elements and marketing to minors.

As such, game choice may be an additional factor impacting the outcomes of online gaming more negatively for them than for their neurotypical peers.

2.2 Reasons for Gaming

The reasons for gaming are diverse. The target group mentions they play games as they:

- Are visually appealing and colourful.
- Enjoy the sense of competition.
- Like advancing to new levels and facing new challenges.
- Appreciate the educational aspect, such as crosswords that help with spelling.
- Have fun when playing.
- Are escaping reality.
- Are otherwise lonely or lack alternatives. They do not have hobbies or lack access to other activities.

In conclusion, the target group seeks enjoyment, meaningful experiences, personal challenges, and opportunities to gain experience. Gaming is also a way of spending their time and staying connected. The last bullet point comes from the workshops in Germany. It suggests that gaming can function as a band aid of sorts, making up for what is failing in real life in terms of social connection, purpose, and meaningful and fun activities. The workshop was conducted in a rural region where lack of access to attractive offline alternatives and time spent commuting are additional issues. One participant stated having five hours of total commuting time to school and back every day, thus taking away many possibilities for meaningful free time.

2.3 Understanding the Impact of Gaming

Different types of games offer varying degrees of benefits, and gaming can lead to both positive and negative outcomes.

Gaming can have positive effects on areas such as friendships, creativity, problem solving, language development and leadership skills. Workshop participants mentioned visual appeal, engaging challenges, opportunities to learn and having fun as key aspects they value.

Potential Issues:

Up to 1% of the European population has internet gaming disorder. Gaming disorder correlates with having low educational and career achievements, problems with peers such as isolation, being a bully or bullying, as well as mental disorders, aggression, and sleep issues. Additionally, there has been studies suggesting a link between violent games and violent behaviour in real life. Furthermore, gaming is sedentary behaviour, carrying both social, mental, and physical risks (Grinspoon, 2020).

During the conducted interviews and workshops, the following issues were identified:

1) Finding alternatives: Some participants in the interviews said that they don't have other hobbies or friends living close to them. Gaming/social media fills the majority of their time. Many stated that spending more time with family is not an alternative to gaming for them.

2) Low willingness to change. Many participants know that they should spend less time online and what healthy alternatives would look like. After receiving suitable information in the workshop and stating to understand the importance and impact, only half of the participants state that they are willing to change their behaviour and even less say they have interest in alternative activities such as spending more time with family or trying new activities.

3) Family and friend dynamics and a lack of positive role models: Gaming and social media are used across generations in families and friend groups, which leaves youth with a lack of positive examples and can prevent the implementation of measures such as mobile phone-free zones or detox days in families.

4) Data collection is difficult: Young people themselves find it hard to estimate how much money and time they spend online and there is little to no other supporting data to find out. For example, gaming companies don't display their revenue streams. Without reliable data, it is hard to draw reliable conclusions and initiate further research.

2.4 Time Loss Due to Gaming

Many participants game predominantly on the afternoon, evening, or weekends. As they then have access and time for it. When asked how much time they spend gaming, answers range for no time to ten hours per day.

Figure 1 depicts how gaming in general is a time issue for the target group. The majority state that it has happened that they have been late, forgetful, or tired because of their gaming habits.

These was a significant difference between the Irish and German groups' workshop answer to "it happened that I was late to school or to something else." All German participants answered "yes," whereas only one Irish participant answered "yes."

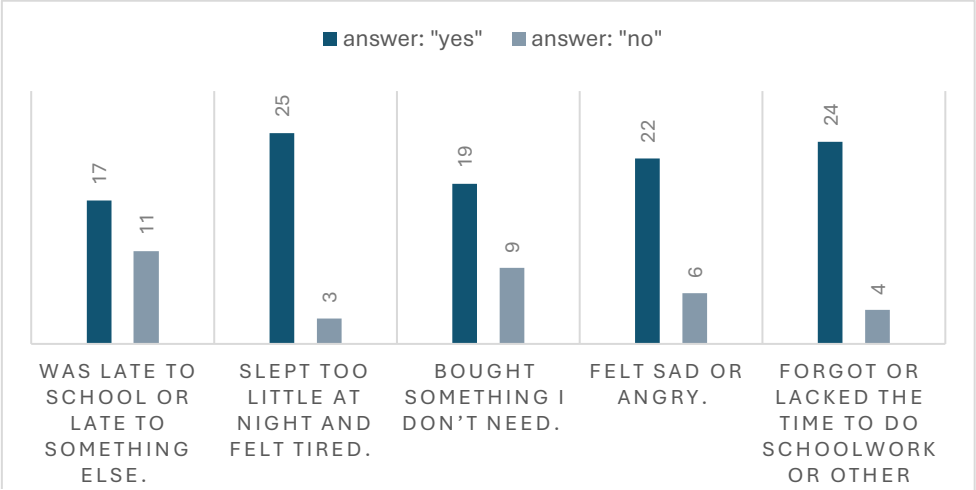

Figure 1 Workshop answers in Germany and Ireland combined on the question "Because of social media or gaming, it happened that I...

23 of 28 workshop participants stated that the workshop was helpful to make them understand how much time they spend online, but only eleven out of twenty-eight said that they are willing to make any changes to the time they spend online. None of the participants in the Irish workshop said that they would be willing to spend less time. On the other hand, it is worth noting that they on average spend less time on gaming in total than the German group.

It can be difficult to separate the time spent on gaming, media, and social media. A person can scroll the feed, stream games on TikTok or take breaks from gaming to watch a YouTube video about the game they are currently playing. However, in general it is clear that the target group spends considerable time on gaming and that it has negative outcomes on other aspects of their life.

2.5 Money Spent on Gaming

According to a poll, conducted by Ipsos in 2023 including 2,808 participants from the countries Germany, Spain, Italy, France, and UK, 76% of interviewed parents claim that their children do not spend money on any games. Sixteen percent state that their child spends money on in-games and 7% do not know about it. Most of the children, who spend money on in-game, spend an amount between €1 and €20 (64 %). Sixteen percent spend between €21 and €40, 12% spend between €41 and €60, 1% spend between €61 and €80 and 7% spend over €80 per month. Overall, the average amount of spent money is 39€ per month (Ipsos, 2023).

In our research, the amount of money youth with additional needs state to spend on gaming varies from none to “spending €1,000 on FIFA”, or “It was a lot, then my parents stopped it, but I am not telling how much I spent in the past.”. Some German participants state spending all their money on games and related activities. In contrast, youth in the Irish interviews all state to spend €20 or less per month.

How much money young people spend on online games and social media was a tricky question for young people to answer. They could only estimate. A finding here is therefore that young people have little overview of their spending on games. However, comments made by participants indicate that regulations and parent intervention can have a positive impact of gaming behaviour.

Different games have different monetization models, which can be divided into categories:

- Free-to-Play
  - Basic access is free; revenue comes from in-game purchases.
  - Often includes in-app buys, cosmetics, or power-ups.
- Pay-to-Win
  - Paying players gain competitive advantages
  - Common in mobile strategy and role-play games.
- Subscription-based
  - Players pay monthly or annual fees
  - Example: World of Warcraft
- Buy-to-Play
  - One-time purchase, sometimes with additional paid content.
  - Example: Minecraft
- Gacha / Loot Box Systems
  - Randomised rewards for payment, sometimes compared to gambling mechanics

- Examples: Genshin Impact, FIFA Ultimate Team

Free-to-play, pay-to-win and loot systems frequently utilize microtransactions, where expenditures are minimal but numerous options exist, necessitating frequent purchases to reach desired outcomes. During the workshops, a wide range of monetisation models, excluding the monthly fee, were frequently cited. Participants further noted the prevalence of games being gifted by family members (buy-to-pay). However, the predominant theme that emerged was the utilisation of games that are initially free, but subsequently offer in-game payment options. These pay options were reported to be used for the purpose of accelerating the attainment of results, attaining victory, and effecting cosmetic alterations.

Furthermore, some participants described using free games without paying and instead opting to watch in-game advertisements to continue playing. It is evident that the advertising in free games to youth has a significant impact on their preferences and behaviour. Nineteen out of the twenty-eight participants indicated that they had purchased non-essential items as a result of their gaming activities (see Figure 1), such as energy drinks. This finding underscores the existence of additional influences and costs associated with gaming.

As illustrated by the following participant's statement, a transition from a paid to a free gaming model can be challenging: "I can't imagine going back to not paying because it would get boring, and I'm not prepared to accept a longer waiting time" This statement additionally highlights the psychological and financial commitment that individuals make to gaming.

Overall, it is clear that many in the target group are spending a considerable proportion of their disposable income on gaming, and that while gaming provides enjoyment and relaxation, it also limits their lives outside the online world, with the risk of a negative spiral where real life becomes increasingly difficult and unattractive.

3 Insights Gathered on Social Media

3.1 Social Media Behaviour and Channels

According to Smahel et al. (2020), 77% of European youth are regular users of social media. In Ireland, as much as 95% of youth in the age group 13-17 are active social media users (CyberSafeKids, 2023). A study in Germany from 2023 found that 91% of German youth in the age group 14-29 use social media regularly (Koch, 2023).

More recent data published by Statista in September 2024 highlights that social media usage continues to rise, with Facebook remaining the most widely used platform in Western Europe, boasting over 449 million users as of 2023. Instagram follows with approximately 294 million users, while platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, and Snapchat are experiencing steady growth (Dixon, 2024). Among these, TikTok and Snapchat are particularly popular with Generation Z, who tend to favour more visually dynamic and short-form content. In Spain, for instance, TikTok has already reached 21.6 million users, only slightly fewer than Instagram’s 22.6 million. In Germany, WhatsApp is by far the most used social platform.

A notable shift in digital engagement occurs around the age of fourteen, where gaming—more common among younger youth—gives way to increased social media use. The percentage of youth engaging

with social media varies by country and increases significantly with age. In Germany, for example, 11% of children aged 9–11, 50% of those aged 12–14, and 75% of those aged 15–16 report regular social media use (Smahel et al., 2020). The most common platform in the age group 12-19 year olds is WhatsApp, with 84% of females and 74% of males with a smartphone using the tool. It is followed by Instagram and TikTok. Females are stronger represented on Instagram and males on YouTube. Especially short form videos are deemed interesting (mpfs, 2023).

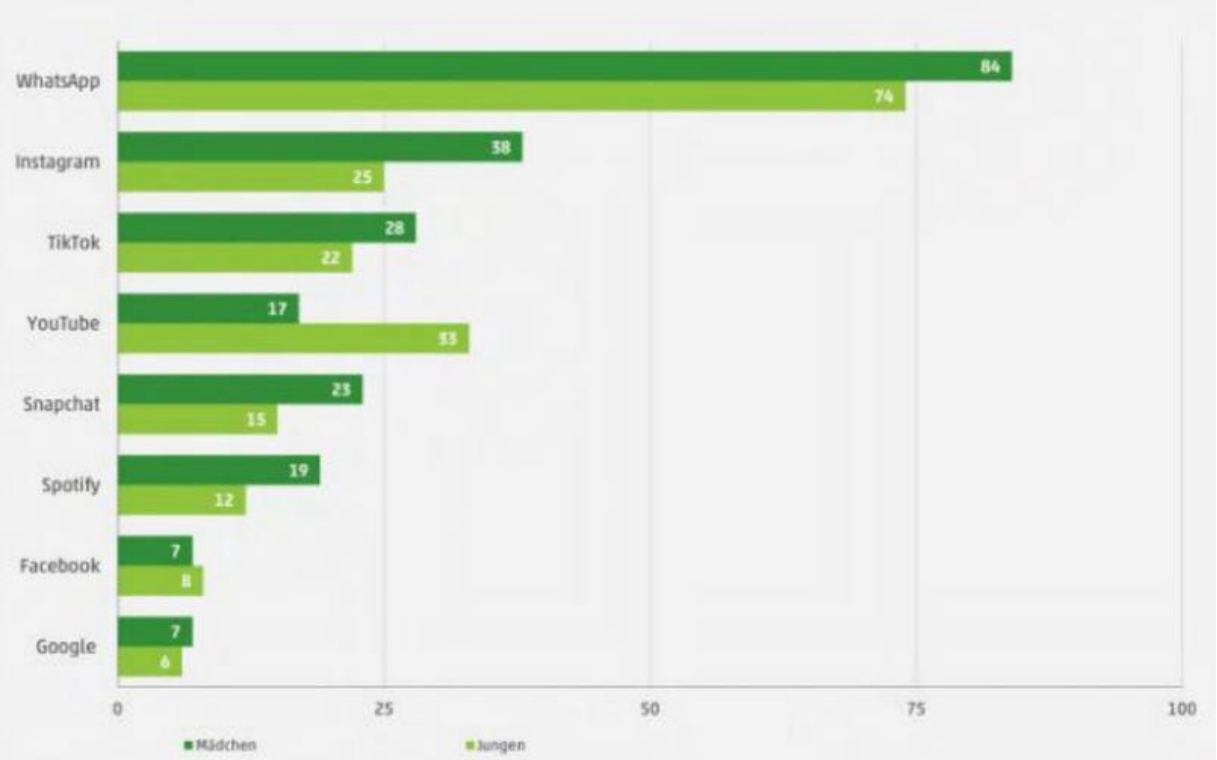

Figure 2 Popular Social Media Channels for youth in Germany aged 12-19, separated in boys and girls in 2023, N=1 162 (mpfs, 2023).

These broader trends were mirrored in our research. Across interviews and workshops, participants frequently cited WhatsApp, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok as their most-used platforms. German participants also mentioned Twitch, a platform that bridges gaming and social interaction through live broadcasts and chat features.

Participants reported using social media for a variety of purposes, including sending messages, watching videos, reading news, and staying in contact with friends and family. In a Statista survey, for participants in Germany and France, the most commonly cited function was messaging, whereas in the UK it was liking posts. In Italy, social media was predominantly used for consuming news, followed by leisure browsing and maintaining social connections (Dixon, 2024a).

Workshop participants in Germany echoed these findings, particularly highlighting the use of social media for messaging and video consumption. Liking content or following specific creators was viewed as less important. Many participants in both countries indicated that they relied on algorithm-driven feeds to discover content, rather than actively subscribing to or engaging with specific influencers. The interviews further revealed that a notable portion of youth with additional needs actively create content themselves, either for a public channel or for the purpose of sharing with family and friends only.

In both Germany and Ireland, youth showed strong preferences for content aligned with their personal interests—especially humorous videos, gaming content, sports highlights, and beauty-related media.

3.2 Target Group Reasons for Social Media

When the target group was asked why they watched online videos, the main answers were “they are funny” and “they are interesting.” Participants also use social media to listen to music. In Ireland, the artists Dolly Parton and Daniel O'Donnell were mentioned. Further topics that were of interest to the female respondents were:

- Makeup and fashion,
- Nail design ideas, but mostly
- Connecting with family and friends and
- Fill extra time like breaks to avoid boredom.

3.3 Understanding the Impact of Social Media

Social media offers a range of potential benefits to its users, including opportunities for identity development, access to online social support, the promotion of positive health behaviours, and the availability of professional guidance in digital spaces. For adolescents, these platforms can serve as important tools for self-expression and connection, particularly for those who may experience social exclusion in offline contexts.

However, these benefits are counterbalanced by well-documented issues. Research links social media use with increased levels of depressive and anxious symptoms, problematic usage patterns (including social media addiction), disordered eating behaviours, body image concerns, and, in severe cases, self-harm and suicidality. These issues are not only present but may be amplified for adolescents with additional needs.

As Borgström, Daneback, and Molin (2019) point out, social media can function as an alternative space where individuals with disabilities can expand their social circles, stay connected with others, and express opinions in an environment where they often feel a greater sense of control. It offers the possibility for individuals to engage in interactions without disclosing their disability, allowing them to participate on equal footing with non-disabled users.

At the same time, the digital environment also poses heightened risks for this group. Adolescents with intellectual impairments are statistically more vulnerable to cyberbullying, threats, and exploitation, particularly of a financial or sexual nature. As Borgström et al. (2019, p. 136) caution, “The internet carries significant risks for individuals with poor insight and social judgement,” and it is therefore essential that educators, caregivers, and clinicians engage proactively with this population about both the opportunities and potential harms of online engagement.

These dynamics were reflected in our own interviews and workshops. Some participants reported experiences of cyberbullying, and some did not. Others normalised such behaviour, referring to it as “part of the game.” In certain cases, individuals acknowledged being banned from online platforms or games due to their own inappropriate behaviour—such as verbal insults—and subsequently having to create new accounts in order to rejoin. This highlights the complexity of online social dynamics and the

need for targeted support to help young people with additional needs navigate digital spaces safely and responsibly.

As depicted in Figure 1, the majority of participants describe having been tardy, tired, felt angry or sad or have been forgetful due to their social media and gaming habits. Some participants reported feeling sad and depressed when faced with all the great images, things, and stories on social media. Even though they know the videos and photos are edited and manipulated with filters, they often still feel sad. One participant describes having lost a friend after cancelling an in-person meeting for the fourth time as a result of their online habits. Another participant described having to purchase more expensive food options on Sundays, such as take aways, as they forget to go grocery shopping on the day before.

Again, willingness to change is an issue. Although some in the target group said they would be willing to change their online behaviour after the knowledge transfer and discussion during the workshops, many are not. Of those who are willing to do so, some also find alternatives such as trying a new activity/hobby or spending more time with family and friends unappealing. Without attractive alternatives, a hypothetical willingness to change is unlikely to translate into actual behavioural change.

3.4 Time Loss Due to Social Media

According to data published by Statista, global social media usage averages two hours and 26 minutes per day, based on a large-scale survey involving participants aged 16 to 64 across fifty-one countries (Dixon, 2024a). While this figure provides a useful global benchmark, usage patterns vary significantly across age groups and national contexts.

When focusing specifically on youth, different studies suggest higher usage rates. The Irish organisation CyberSafeKids reports that young people in Ireland typically spend two to four hours daily on social media, with usage concentrated in the evenings and on weekends (CyberSafeKids, 2023). Similar trends have been documented in Germany. For instance, Kaiser (2025) found that average daily social media use increases rapidly with age: 10–11-year-olds in Germany spend an average of 51 minutes per day, while 14–15-year-olds spend approximately double that time.

As previously discussed, the distinction between gaming and social media is increasingly blurred, particularly through content like "Let's Play" videos, where users consume gaming-related content via social platforms such as YouTube or TikTok. This overlap complicates efforts to measure time spent separately in each domain.

When asked about their own social media usage, participants in our study reported a wide range—from less than one hour to as much as 12 hours per day. Some indicated they filled every spare moment, including school breaks, with social media to avoid boredom. Youth in the Irish group reported lower usage, typically between one and two hours daily, while German participants cited higher engagement.

Our findings suggest that the amount of time the target group spends on social media is influenced by two key factors:

- External restrictions, such as those imposed by parents, schools, or youth institutions, and
- The availability of appealing offline alternatives, including hobbies, social opportunities, and structured activities.

Additionally, geographic, and social factors play a role—particularly for the German participants. Many of them live in rural or isolated settings with limited access to recreational infrastructure. Long commutes, lack of local activities, and in some cases social isolation or family separation, appeared to contribute to elevated levels of online activity as a default form of engagement and entertainment.

All in all, social media plays a key role in the life of the target group. While some keep their consumption on a manageable level, others are spending far too much time online to be able to also manage other important parts of life. One workshop participant stated:

“Yesterday I wanted to go to bed at 11 p.m., but then it was 3 a.m. again [due to online scrolling], and I had to get up shortly after 5 a.m. to catch the bus. Now I’m very tired.”

3.5 Money Spent on Social Media

Participants generally reported not spending money on social media, such as donations to influencers or premium subscriptions for platforms like Spotify. Instead, they predominantly used free versions, tolerating advertisements as part of the experience. While the majority of participants in Ireland and Germany did not report buying influencer merchandise, a few acknowledged occasional purchases—such as hoodies, lighters, or books—but often expressed dissatisfaction with the quality or value of these items.

Overall, direct financial expenditure related to social media appeared to be less significant in comparison to gaming among this group. However, it can be argued that the indirect cost lies in the influence of advertising and curated content on the values, preferences, and consumer behaviour of youth. Exposure to persistent marketing and influencer-driven trends may subtly shape desires and purchasing habits, potentially leading to increased consumption over time.

Data from Germany, as illustrated in Figure 2, shows that youth spend significantly more time on social media platforms than on search engines, suggesting a shift in where they derive knowledge and opinions. Instead of seeking factual information through traditional search, many rely on short-form influencer content, which may carry subjective or commercially driven narratives. Participants also noted that excessive social media use has, in some cases, led to skipping school, which could have long-term implications for educational attainment and future earning potential. As a participant in a workshop said: "We're always late, or we don't go at all, and then we regret it over and over again."

Another notable consideration is the potential financial barrier for youth with learning disabilities in accessing social media. Engagement typically requires not only a functioning device and stable internet connection but also a baseline of digital literacy. Despite this, our study found no convincing evidence that financial hardship or additional needs prevents access. Even participants with limited resources appeared to prioritise having a smartphone and be able to use it for the activities important to them.

In particular, educators at the Production School in Greven, Germany, reported cases of youth repeatedly taking on new mobile contracts, rapidly exhausting their data limits, and subsequently acquiring additional devices. These patterns resulted in significant debt, sometimes reaching into the thousands of euros, driven by the need to remain connected to social media and gaming platforms[1] .

[1] Outcome of talks with the personal at the Greven Production School prior to the studies made in the FITING4YOU project

This demonstrates how digital participation, though socially expected, may lead to financial vulnerability, particularly among young people with limited awareness of the long-term consequences.

4 Influencers and Their Impact

Children and adolescents are frequent users of the internet, with social media forming a central part of their daily lives. Within the European Union, 95% of adolescents aged 16 to 19 report using the internet daily. Against this backdrop, the influence of social media figures—also known as social media influencers (SMIs)—on youth is becoming increasingly significant. As De Castro et al. (2021) explain, “digital influencers seem to be a crucial influence in the lives of young people; firstly, because adolescents spend a large part of their time online and are therefore very much exposed in a range of ways to influencers’ content. Secondly, adolescents increasingly relate personally with SMIs and turn to them not only for entertainment but also for information, advice, company, and comfort” (p. 59). As such, influencers have the potential to shape multiple aspects of adolescent life, both positively and negatively, depending on the nature of their content and the characteristics of their audience (e.g., age, gender).

Among Europe’s youth, prominent influencers include the Swedish YouTuber PewDiePie, known for his Let’s Play videos and who, despite being semi-retired, still retains a large following of 111 million subscribers. Similarly, Khaby Lame, an Italian TikTok content creator with over 162 million followers, is globally recognised for his humorous and relatable short-form videos that parody over-complicated "life hacks", offering simpler solutions (Wikipedia, 2024).

The influence of social media is multifaceted and not uniformly positive. Certain high-visibility content creators disseminate narratives that may include financially unsustainable practices, health-adverse behaviours, or critical stances toward conventional labour structures. Such content can be especially impactful for younger audiences still in the process of developing critical media literacy.

Conversely, some influencers use their platforms to foster positive habits, awareness, and inclusivity. One such example is Daniel M. Jones, a British content creator diagnosed with autism and ADHD, who runs the platform The Aspie World. With a following of over 47,000, Jones creates content aimed at raising awareness about autism and sharing his lived experience to educate and empower others.

Field research conducted as part of this study revealed that Irish participants typically do not follow specific influencers, instead engaging with algorithmically suggested content based on their interests. The only area where brand or creator loyalty was more evident was in music, where participants followed particular artists on music platforms, although they rarely sought out additional non-musical content from them. German participants showed similar behaviour; however, when asked directly, they demonstrated familiarity with major online influencers, suggesting that even those who “just scroll” are still regularly exposed to dominant voices in the youth content space.

Furthermore, both Irish and German participants reported instances of purchasing products they had seen promoted by influencers, and in some cases, even donating money during livestreams in exchange for a personal mention. Notably, some participants described these purchases as overpriced or disappointing, yet continued to engage in such spending behaviour.

These findings indicate that influencers do have a measurable impact on the spending habits of young people with additional needs. However, there appears to be limited awareness among the target group regarding the extent of this influence. The persuasive power of influencer marketing, coupled with the immersive nature of social media, makes it challenging for youth to critically assess how their values, preferences, and financial decisions are being shaped by the content they consume.

5 Legal Framework and Cyber Safety

5.1 Legal Framework for Protecting Youth in the Area of Online Risks

A range of initiatives and regulatory frameworks have been established across Europe to enhance digital safety for youth and other vulnerable groups. Key measures include:

- The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which provides a comprehensive framework for protecting personal data.
- The Digital Services Act (DSA), which introduces important provisions related to transparency, content moderation, and the protection of minors online.
- The PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) system, which classifies video games based on age-appropriateness and content.
- The "Video Games Europe" initiative, a collaborative network of national agencies dedicated to promoting safe and responsible gaming, including parental education and awareness-raising.

These EU-level instruments influence national policy across member states and form the foundation for additional regulations currently under development. These include restrictions on potentially addictive design features, such as infinite scrolling and aggressive pop-up mechanisms. For further detail, refer to the EU Desk Research Report (see references).

While these legal frameworks represent important steps toward improving online safety, enforcement remains challenging—particularly when dealing with large, fast-moving global platforms such as Facebook. Such companies often possess the financial capacity to absorb regulatory fines rather than making meaningful changes to their operational models, thereby limiting the practical impact of some legislative efforts.

5. 2 Cyber Criminality and Risks as an Aspect of Financial and Time Impact

Types of Cyber Criminality

In European research, three subtypes are typically identified: These are as follows:

(i) Exposure to harmful, manipulative, or exploitative content (e.g. harmful sexual material, scams); (ii) Experiencing negative contact online (e.g. being bullied, being groomed for sexual contact/radicalisation); and (iii) Engagement in criminal or antisocial behaviour or conduct (e.g. online

bullying, trolling, or flaming, sending inappropriate content). (Dr. Chadwick, 2019, p. 1). Initially, these categories were applied to individuals without an intellectual disability, and have since been adapted for application to individuals with disabilities. However, this adaptation is controversial (Dr. Chadwick, 2019).

Studies with People with Disabilities

A number of studies have sought to ascertain how persons close to our target group perceive the risk of online presence for those with disabilities. These studies concluded that there is broad agreement among these groups that individuals with learning impairments face a heightened risk when engaging in online activities. The most commonly cited risks are as follows: being the victim of bullying, threats, or harassment online; being susceptible to online marketing scams; and disclosing excessive personal information. (Dr. Chadwick, 2019, p. 3). Teachers, in particular, identified the potential for isolation, misinterpretation of internet content, and naivety as significant concerns. Conversely, parents voiced concerns that their children with learning disabilities might exhibit excessive trust, inability to discern deception, and heightened sensitivity to online content and interactions.

Outcomes for Persons with Additional Needs

A research study conducted in 2017 surveyed 77 adults with learning challenges and inquired about the risks they had previously encountered online. The study revealed that 48% of participants had encountered being blocked from online groups and activities, 46% had been subjected to verbal abuse, 35% had received threats, and an equivalent percentage had been recipients of unsolicited sexual content. Additionally, 36% reported instances of their passwords being used without their consent by other individuals (Chiner et al., 2017). In addition, the research involved in-depth interviews with caregivers, which revealed that individuals with disabilities are not merely victims but also perpetrators of antisocial and inappropriate behaviours, including insults, threats, and unwanted flirting. (Dr. Chadwin, 2019, p. 4).

In order to safeguard young adults with learning impairments from the risk of having negative outcomes online, various restrictions are often employed to protect them. These restrictions encompass a range of measures, including supervision, monitoring, and the blocking of specific websites. Nevertheless, such measures have the potential to impede the development of skills, self-determination, and digital participation (Dr. Chadwick, 2019).

In our interviews and workshops, Irish participants demonstrated an elevated level of awareness and prior education regarding online safety. While 20% reported having played games not suited to their age, most expressed concern primarily around issues such as losing passwords or receiving unpleasant messages from strangers. However, none reported having been direct victims of cybercrime.

In contrast, several participants in Germany described more direct experiences with cybercrime, including the loss of virtual items or account access, sometimes requiring them to repurchase or re-earn digital content. Forgotten passwords were also cited as a common reason for losing access to accounts. Additional insights emerged during the German workshops, where participants openly discussed instances of inappropriate online behaviour. Some admitted to having been temporarily banned from platforms due to verbal abuse or insults directed at other players, highlighting the dual role youth may play as both victims and perpetrators in online spaces.

During the evaluation phase of the German workshops, all 16 participants expressed that they had learned significantly about online safety and showed a clear willingness to adopt safer online behaviours moving forward. In Ireland, by contrast, participants reported that the workshop did not significantly increase their knowledge in this area, as they already felt well-informed on the topic.

Overall, the findings suggest that cybercrime and online safety are relevant concerns for young people with additional needs, affecting both their digital time investment and financial well-being. Importantly, the results indicate that targeted education can be a highly effective intervention, particularly in groups with lower initial awareness or exposure to the topic.

6 Educational Offers and Method Evaluation

6.1 Best Practice Educational Offers

In Ireland, two best practice educational offers for our target group on digital well-being were identified:

- CyberSafeKids, which offers workshops and resources on online safety, specifically targeting young people and those with additional needs. Website: https://www.cybersafekids.ie/
- WebwiseProvider, an initiative of the Irish Safer Internet Centre, providing educational resources and training for safe internet use among young people. Website: https://www.webwise.ie/

Both providers have comprehensive programmes with content suitable for the target group and are not influenced by commercial motives. They effectively address financial and time management issues associated with digital use.

In Germany, the Medienscout MV project is a project coordinated by the State Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. It uses a peer-concept educating youth to function as online safety ambassadors.

The second-best practice offer in Germany is the educational provider and project partner “MMT Academics.” MMT is an organisation that works on various educational offerings related to such as financial literacy, entrepreneurship and gaming and social media. Both initiatives are not influenced by commercial motives. Furthermore, MMT has extensive experience with the target group[2] of this project.

It was not possible to invite CyberSafeKids or WebwiseProvider for the Irish workshop, thus the Irish project partner Future in Perspective developed a workshop based on their offers and findings in the FITING4YOU project. MMT Academics held the workshops in Germany.

Overall, there are some good offers available that teach young people with additional needs how to develop healthy habits online. However, there is a need for more offers to be made available to the target group, their parents, and educators. Furthermore, these groups have to receive information about

[2] The skillset MMT possess was a contributing factor for initiating this project.

the offers that are available to date. The results of the interviews and the workshop show that for education to be effective, it needs to be personalised, preferably face-to-face, in a workshop format and with small groups of peers.

6.2 Workshop Set Up and Reception

The workshops employed a variety of interactive and youth-friendly methods to sustain engagement and motivation among participants. Techniques included presentations, brainstorming sessions, role-playing exercises, creating posters and facilitated group discussions. Core topics covered throughout the sessions included mechanisms behind time and financial consumption online, strategies for time management, moderation of digital spending, and online safety practices. The workshops were evaluated, and qualitative feedback was collected from participants. For further detail, refer to the individual workshop reports.

Participants in both Ireland and Germany consistently found the workshops interesting and relevant to their everyday experiences. While most described the sessions as enjoyable and engaging, a small number—three participants in Germany—reported feeling slightly uncomfortable when reflecting on their personal digital habits, particularly the amount of time spent on gaming and social media. In Ireland, some participants expressed surprise upon realising they spent considerably more time online than their peers, which led them to reflect more critically on their own usage patterns.

In one German workshop, the class teacher was present and provided valuable feedback, confirming that the content was highly relevant for the target group. The teacher observed that a class typically disengaged in other settings became active and vocal during the session. The workshop's delivery was seen as affirming and relatable, fostering a sense of being understood among the learners. The teacher recommended offering more such educational programmes and expressed interest in expanded content on online safety. Notably, the workshop also helped the teacher gain new insights into certain behaviours in the classroom that had previously been difficult to interpret. This highlights the potential benefit of involving educators—either through targeted training materials or direct participation—in such initiatives, as it can support both learners with additional needs and their teaching staff.

In summary, the workshop format was deemed highly effective for delivering educational content related to digital time and money use among youth with additional needs. The combination of peer interaction, guided reflection, and accessible instruction proved conducive to learning and behaviour change. However, the evaluation also revealed limitations. Some participants remained reluctant to adopt alternative hobbies or increase offline social engagement, indicating that knowledge transfer alone may not suffice in shifting already deeply ingrained digital habits.

To support sustained change, a broader ecosystem of support is needed—including accessible infrastructure, personal networks, and motivational frameworks—to help young people cultivate meaningful offline activities. Educators at the Production School in Greven often emphasise the importance of early intervention, as attempts to modify the digital behaviour of older adolescents are often met with resistance in combination with reduced influence from both parents and teachers[3]. Thus,

[3] see footnote 1

the development of positive offline experiences and social environments should begin as early as possible to complement educational efforts and foster long-term digital well-being.

7 Report Summary and Recommendations

7.1 Summary

Through a combination of desk research, interviews, and interactive workshops in Ireland and Germany, the FITING4YOU project explored how gaming and social media influence the time use and financial behaviour of young people with additional needs.

Key findings include:

- Daily engagement with gaming and social media is widespread among youth with additional needs, often ranging from a few hours to over 12 hours per day. This screen time frequently replaces offline socialising, learning, or physical activities—especially in rural areas with limited mobility and fewer alternatives.
- Gaming is often the first digital activity young people engage with, and it is particularly dominant among male participants. Preferences leaned towards shooter games and competitive formats among males, while females tended to engage with casual or simulation games. Overall, the target group tend to prefer games with more aggressive nature or less potential for learning than the youth segment in general.
- While many participants used free-to-play games, the cost is often hidden through microtransactions, in-game purchases, and paid upgrades. Some young people reported making impulsive purchases or repeatedly spending small amounts that added up over time. There were also some big spenders in the target group, spending all their available time and money towards gaming, with some even accruing dept to be able to remain online. Others lost access to purchased items or accounts due to cybercrime or forgotten passwords—a form of monetary loss.
- Social media influencers and gaming streamers are influential in shaping spending behaviour. Even participants who claimed not to follow influencers reported buying products promoted in videos or donating during livestreams. In all, youth spend more money directly on gaming than on social media. Social media has a more indirect effect on values and purchase behaviour.
- Across both countries, participants demonstrated varying levels of awareness of their own digital consumption. While some were unaware of how much time or money they spent online, workshops helped spark self-reflection, particularly in Germany, where many reported learning new strategies for online safety and moderation.
- In general, the way the target group spends time and money online has significant opportunity costs and influences general life outcomes.
- Formulating general finding is difficult partly due to the small data sample and partly because of the diverse target group and their answers. There were significant differences in individual

behaviours and the data points collected were heterogeneous. In addition, there is a lack of best practise provides and existing data.

7.2 Issues Identified

- Gaming and social media are deeply embedded in daily life, often crowding out other activities for reasons such as a lack of accessible and attractive alternatives.
- The risks associated with digital play and participation are not always recognised by young people, especially in environments that normalize small, frequent purchases or influencer marketing.
- Digital behaviours are difficult to regulate for parents and educators, particularly among older teens, and especially when perceived as “socially necessary” to fit in.
- Cybercrime, account loss, and inappropriate online behaviour (including bullying and platform bans) were reported by several participants, indicating vulnerability in both digital safety and social interaction skills.
- A lack of education on digital media literacy. While education on more balanced online behaviours has been shown to improve outcomes, access to such instruction remains inconsistent among young people.
- Data collection is difficult because there is a lack of prior research and the little that is available has varied results, making it difficult to draw general conclusions. Primary data collection is also difficult because young people themselves find it difficult to estimate how much money and time they spend online. There is little or no other data to compare their statements with. For example, from gaming companies.

7.3 Recommendations and Action Points

To reduce the potential financial and time-related harms of gaming and social media among youth with additional needs, and to support healthier digital engagement, we recommend:

Sustainable support for offline hobbies and social networks

- Provide structured, inclusive alternatives to digital entertainment, such as clubs, youth centres, and creative programs.
- Ensure long-term funding to prevent regression into excessive screen time due to lack of consistent access.

Prioritize early, accessible digital education

- Embed media literacy, financial awareness, and online safety education in schools and youth programs.
- Tailor content to the cognitive and emotional needs to the target group, involving experts and using practical, relatable examples.

Improve and implement legislative framework

Sustained efforts towards the refinement and operationalization of policy and legislative frameworks, ensuring their practical application and accessibility to intended beneficiaries.

Support families and educators as gatekeepers

Promote parental controls, school-based regulation, and teacher training as essential tools in managing time and money spent online.

Improve mobility and infrastructure in rural areas

Invest in transportation solutions and local initiatives to connect isolated youth with engaging offline opportunities.

Deliver reflection-based workshops

- Expand access to proven formats that encourage peer discussion, behaviour change, and emotional insight.
- Include content on both social media and gaming, especially around microtransactions, influencer marketing, and digital self-regulation.

Conduct comprehensive, long-term studies on youth digital spending

Establish clear data and transparency around how much time and money is being invested in gaming and social media, particularly by vulnerable groups, to better shape policy.

Leverage cross-country learning

Increase investment in comparative research across European countries to better understand variations in digital usage patterns and outcomes. Identify factors contributing to more effective regulation, higher awareness, or successful offline alternatives, and assess which practices can be adapted or scaled across contexts.

7.4 Conclusion

Gaming and social media are dominant forces in the lives of young people with additional needs—shaping how they spend time, where they place value, and how they relate to others and themselves. While these platforms offer opportunities for connection and creativity, they also carry significant risks in terms of overuse, financial exploitation, missed offline development and skewed values.

Recognising these issues, this project has shown that positive change is (both necessary and) achievable. Through education, structured support, and early intervention, young people can become more conscious of their digital behaviour—and feel empowered to make choices resulting in a more balanced lifestyle. However, knowledge transfer and reflection alone are not enough. A holistic ecosystem of offline opportunities, regulation, family support, and community engagement are needed to create lasting, positive change in the digital lives of this vulnerable group.

Moreover, the field would benefit from increased empirical research and cross-national comparative studies, as variations in outcomes among European countries suggest the potential for valuable policy learning and knowledge transfer.

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