

Youth mental health: Are our children's minds being hijacked by social media?



Introduction

Social media empowers young people but also exposes them to digital pressures, sleep deprivation, and low self-esteem. The question isn't whether it plays a role in youth wellbeing—but how we ensure it serves, and not exploits them.

In this edition of **The Exchange**, Global Child Forum's discussion series, we bring you an edited conversation straight from [GSMA MWC Barcelona](#).

The topic? Hooked: Are our children's minds being hijacked by social media?

Let's dive in.

The Participants



Moderator - Carla Haddad Mardini

Director, Private Fundraising & Partnerships, UNICEF



Brittany Loor

U-Reporter, Youth Advocate, Ecuador, UNICEF



Andrew Przybylski

Professor of Human Behaviour & Technology, University of Oxford



Nina Vollmer

Director of Child Rights & Sustainability, Global Child Forum

The Exchange



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Many young people today navigate social media as both a source of connection and a source of pressure. While it offers opportunities for learning, advocacy, and mental health awareness, the constant exposure to curated content and the pressure to always be "on" can lead to anxiety, sleep deprivation, and self-esteem challenges.

The debate often focuses on screen-time, but the reality is far more complex—impacted by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and the nature of content consumed.

The real question is: How do we protect young people from digital risks while harnessing social media's potential for good?

In this session, we will explore the risks, the bigger picture, and solutions with experts and youth voices, setting the stage for meaningful action.

Let's start with Brittany. As a youth advocate and founder of a youth organisation in Ecuador, how do young people in your community perceive social media?

Brittany Loor



Social media is a double-edged sword. For many young people, including myself, it's a tool for advocacy, learning, and connection. But it also reinforces unrealistic standards. The problem isn't just screen-time—it's the kind of content we consume.

In my work, I've seen how digital platforms can empower youth to push for policy change, but they also create environments where young people feel pressured to conform to certain ideals. We need solutions that balance empowerment with protection.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Andrew, your research focuses on the intersection of technology and human motivation. What do we actually know—and not know—about the impact of social media on youth mental health?

Andrew Przybylski



There is a strong narrative that social media is causing a youth mental health crisis, but the reality is much more nuanced.

While negative experiences exist, the data overwhelmingly shows that access to the internet and social platforms benefits young people. It allows them to connect across cultures, find communities, and access information.

The real issue isn't social media itself—it's how we use it. Instead of fearing technology, we should focus on how to make it work better for youth.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Nina, you work with businesses to promote responsible digital practices. What role do corporations and platforms play in shaping young people's online experiences?

Nina Volmer



Businesses have a huge responsibility, but many don't even see children as direct stakeholders. Digital platforms are designed primarily for adults, but children still use them—often without safeguards.



Companies need to consider young users in their design processes and create safer, more inclusive digital spaces. There are different actors in the digital ecosystem and they all have responsibility for different parts of a child's experience online.

Our [research](#) at Global Child Forum shows that while some companies take children's rights seriously, many do not.

There needs to be a fundamental shift in how businesses approach youth online safety.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Brittany, how do we better engage young people in designing digital solutions?

Brittany Loor



We need a shift from treating youth as passive users to co-creators. I propose the “Three R” approach: Reset, Record, Reconnect.

The **Reset** is where Tech companies need to rethink engagement strategies and focus on empowerment over algorithms that promote unrealistic ideals.

To **Record** means document and amplify youth experiences, particularly those from marginalised communities.

Finally, **Reconnect**, which is collaboration between tech companies, policymakers, and youth is essential. Young people should be at the table when designing digital tools that affect them.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Andrew, what research gaps need to be addressed to inform better policies and interventions?

Andrew Przybylski



The biggest challenge is that we don't have access to comprehensive data from tech companies. Governments claim to be concerned about youth mental health, yet they still collect tax revenue from these companies without investing in meaningful research.

A simple solution? Allocate a percentage of tech tax revenue to studying youth digital wellbeing. Without independent access to platform data, we can't make fully informed policy decisions.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Nina, what should businesses, policymakers, and civil society prioritise to ensure digital platforms serve young people better?

Nina Volmer



Engagement. We need stronger collaboration between companies, policymakers, and youth advocates.

Right now, efforts are fragmented. Governments create policies without fully understanding platform design, businesses focus on compliance rather than meaningful change, and youth voices are often missing.

We need integrated approaches where everyone works together to build safer, more empowering digital spaces.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Let's wrap up with a message to decision-makers.

Brittany, if you could tell policymakers and tech leaders one thing, what would it be?

Brittany Loor



Listen to young people. Invest in digital literacy for underserved communities and make sure youth voices are part of tech policy decisions.

We don't just want regulation—we want real change that reflects our experiences and needs.

“We need stronger collaboration between companies, policymakers, and youth advocates. Right now, efforts are fragmented. Governments create policies without fully understanding platform design, businesses focus on compliance rather than meaningful change, and youth voices are missing.”

Nina Vollmer



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Andrew, what's the most urgent research priority?

Andrew Przybylski



Data transparency. Until researchers have independent access to platform data, we're making policies in the dark. Governments should mandate data-sharing for academic research.



Carla Haddad Mardini (Moderator)

Nina, what's your top priority for businesses?

Nina Volmer



To engage with young people!

To me, this is key to both a better user experience and to better business: include young users - those who are affected in the conversations that you're having about solutions. ●



GLOBAL CHILD FORUM: THE EXCHANGE

Key Findings

From Moderator, Carla Haddad Mardini:

“Stop treating child safety as a cost centre. Companies that prioritise youth wellbeing can actually gain market trust and consumer loyalty. Safety and ethical design should be business imperatives, not just regulatory obligations.”

Today's discussion highlighted a critical truth: Youth mental health and digital wellbeing require a collective effort. Policymakers, educators, tech companies, researchers, and youth themselves all have a role to play. Let's move beyond simplistic narratives and work towards a digital world that truly supports young people.”

TOOLS & SERVICES

Your guide to sustainability and ESRS Reporting

The **Corporate Playbook: Embedding Children's Rights in ESRS Reporting** outlines how companies can integrate child rights into sustainability strategies, prioritise safety in digital design, and most importantly, listen to youth voices.

Click below to find out more.

[CORPORATE PLAYBOOK](#)



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