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A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education
Grant Agreement No. 2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043



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Short Description	This report presents the results of desk research conducted in Portugal within the ASAP project. It explores the complex relationship between pre-adolescents and digital/social media, with particular attention to cyberbullying, online risks and digital wellbeing. In addition to analysing statistical data and national research findings, the report highlights good practice initiatives, legislative frameworks, and strategies aimed at enhancing digital literacy and fostering safer, more responsible media use among young people in Portugal.

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Executive Summary

The Portugal Desk Research Report, developed within the scope of the ERASMUS+ project ASAP – A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education, aims to provide a concise and comprehensive overview of the intersection between pre-adolescents, digital media, and the Portuguese context. Below, the key findings are summarised and clustered around the following topics:

1) Statistical Data

INE (National Statistics Institute) data show that:

- In **2019**, around 80.9% of households in Portugal had Internet access at home and that the proportion of Internet users in the country was increasing - 76.2% of residents in Portugal aged 16-74 reported having used the Internet in the previous year (INE, 2019).
 - Younger people were signalled as those who most accessed the Internet and digital media and mobile phone or smartphone were the preferred devices (INE, 2019).
 - A marked growth in mobile Internet access has been reported - 82.5% of Internet users use mobile media to access the Internet (INE, 2019).
- Data for **2020**, deeply marked by the pandemic context, highlighted a 3-percentage point increase in the percentage of Internet users compared to 2019 (INE, 2020).
 - The population aged 16 to 74 years used the Internet and digital media with the main purpose of communicating and accessing information (INE, 2020).
 - Activities related to education were those that recorded the greatest increase.
 - The proportions of users who communicated with teachers or colleagues through educational portals (from 14.5% in 2019 to 30.8%) and who attended online courses (from 7.7% to 18.0%) doubled during 2020 (INE, 2020).
- **2022** showed the growing importance of Internet access in mobility and mobile means.
 - Households with children up to 15 years old continue to have higher rates of Internet access (99.2%) and broadband access (97.0%) than the generality of households in 2022 (INE, 2022).
 - Households with children are those whose access to the Internet has risen more (99.2% vs 85.7), both in terms of fixed Internet (95.6% vs 79.7%) and mobile Internet (63% vs 45.1%).
 - 81.8% of people aged 16 to 74 used a mobile phone or smartphone to access the Internet (INE, 2022).
 - The most frequent activities were exchanging instant messages (via WhatsApp, Messenger, etc.), 91.8%, and participating in social networks, 79% (INE, 2022). Activities associated with civic or political participation are those which continue to have a lower participation – only one fifth revealed having expressed their opinion on

a topic on websites or social networks and 13.9% participated in consultations or voting (INE, 2022).

2) National research on social media and preadolescents

In the Portuguese context, research specifically focused on media and digital practices of Portuguese pre-adolescents and their relationship with social media is still scarce.

- The smartphone is the most frequently used device. Pre-adolescents spend an average of 1.8 hours (9-10 year olds) and 2.5 hours (11-12 years olds) on the Internet daily. The preferred activities are listening to music, watching videos, communicating with family and friends, playing online games and visiting social networks.
- Instrumental and communication skills, such as saving photos or changing privacy settings or knowing what to share online, are the skills young people believe to master. They feel less confident regarding the mastery of creative and informational skills. Younger ages (9-12) are less confident users. The skills improve with age and gender matters as boys see themselves as more competent dominating the instrumental and creativity areas, while girls seem to perform best in the critical and social skills.
- Among young people between 12 and 17 years old, communication and technical skills stand out, but they still struggle to master creative and information skills. Boys report confidence in technical and information competences, and girls see themselves as more proficient in the communication and creative domains, and the space of social networks in the lives of young people is growing. Girls tend to use the Internet longer than boys (4 hours vs. 3.7 hours).
- The use of social networks starts between the ages of 10 and 12 (Rebelo, Lopes, Macedo & Salgado, 2020). In her PhD study with children aged 10-12, Castro (2015) found the same trend, and in line with her results.
- Threats of most concern to the children are: identity theft, misuse of personal information, cyberbullying, pornography, and the possibility of someone hurting them (kidnapping, rapping) (Castro & Osório, 2015).
- Among young people aged 11-17 years, 19.5% had been victims of cyberbullying with gender differences. Males are more frequently victims of password theft, dissemination of unauthorised personal information (24.5%), defamation (when a person tries to hurt the reputation of someone, in this case using digital artefacts) (25.9%), publication of videos or photos without consent (25.2%) and exclusion from groups and online games (23.1%).
- Female individuals are more frequently the target of threats, insults, offences and extortion of intimate photographs. Aggressions most frequently promoted through the media are sexting (40%) and threats through messages/emails or offences through the net (34.2%) (De-Barros et al., 2018).
- In the 11 to 14 year old age group, there is a higher appearance of aggression related to offending through electronic media (83.2%), distribution of intimate photos (67.3%), insults through e-mail or messages (62.4%) and threats through the same media (62.4%).
- Very often, victims of cyberbullying are also victims of bullying (75.2%), with 76.1% of the victims managing to identify the bully, although in the case of cyberbullying the crime can often be committed without the identity being revealed. The aggressors are most frequently school colleagues (53.7%), friends (45.4%), or classmates (42.6%) (De-Barros et al., 2018).

- 25% of children aged between 9 and 10 years questioned in the EUKO 2018 survey experienced disturbing situations online – bullying, confrontation with violent or sexual content, among others.
- Cyberbullying predominates over face-to-face bullying – more than a fifth of those who suffer or suffered from this type of aggressions indicated that it occurs several times a month, through mobile calls, text messages, dissemination through social media of unpleasant comments, and threats. 64% of victims of online bullying reported that the messages were unpleasant and hurtful. 1 in 6 young persons, victims of cyberbullying, admitted to have done things against their will (16%) (Ponte & Batista, 2019).
- Sending and receiving sexual messages starts at a young age, from 11 years old. They also report exposure to user-generated content related to violent content and images against people or animals, self-mutilation, hate messages, drug use, incitement to anorexia and ways to commit suicide.
- Girls are the ones who report feeling less safe and having more doubts about what to do when faced with unpleasant situations online.
- Online communication becomes an integral part of teens' and pre-adolescents' lives, problematic use has been on the rise, including social media addiction (WHO, 2020). These situations of addiction tend to increase as age also increases.
- Contact with strangers tends to start early, from 10-11 years of age (Rebelo et al, 2020) and preadolescents tend to omit dangerous situations they experience in online contexts from their parents (Castro & Ponte, 2020).

3) Good practice examples

- Initiatives promoted by various sectors of activity have been identified in the Portuguese context. Some of them have been ongoing and arise from the establishment of partnerships and collaboration between the political, security and educational sectors.
- The good practices identified show a concern with the promotion of media and information literacy skills that not only allow young people to use the media and digital tools in a responsible and enlightened way, but also provide adults with educational responsibilities with the fundamental skills to accompany and support them (young people) in dangerous situations.
- The initiatives identified in the Portuguese report also underline the importance given to the development of materials and tools that can be applied in various contexts and are useful for different audiences – schools, families and end users.
- Besides initiatives targeting specific groups (e.g. children, educators, other professional groups), Portugal has also been promoting initiatives that target the general population, namely: [Stop bullying](#); [Cybebullying.PT](#); [No bully Portugal](#); [Mooc: Bullying e ciberbullying: prevenir e agir dá-lhe respostas! Saiba como reconhecer os sinais de alerta e como intervir!](#); [Bullying.PT](#).

4) Legislation and regulation

- There is no specific law in Portugal focused on cyberbullying.

- The research found several documents that contemplate criminal practices committed online, namely the Tutelary Educational Law (Law 166/1999 of 14 September) and the Student Statute and School Ethics (Law No. 51/2012 of 5 September).
- In general terms, Portugal is governed by international regulations, namely European Commission directives.
- One of the most relevant documents is the **General Comment no. 25 on the Rights of Children in relation to the digital environment, which** details the various ways in which the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to the digital world, stressing not only the rights that must be considered – such as the rights to access information, freedom of expression, privacy and data protection, digital literacy, among others.

Introduction

Digital media are nowadays an integral part of the daily lives of individuals, including pre-adolescents. With access to a wide variety of digital platforms and devices, young people find themselves navigating a complex digital landscape that presents both opportunities and challenges. Understanding the relationship of pre-adolescents with digital media, as well as initiatives that have been conducted with a focus on online safety and promoting digital skills in the Portuguese context is crucial for educators, parents, policymakers, and researchers to ensure the well-being, healthy development and safety of this age group.

This report, developed within the scope of the project ASAP – A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education (2022-1-IT02-KA220-SCH-000090043) aims to provide a concise and comprehensive overview of the intersection between pre-adolescents, digital media, and the Portuguese context. It collects and examines data from studies and initiatives conducted over the last two decades seeking to analyse the evolving role of digital media in the lives of pre-adolescents and established relationships. The report will delve into several key areas, including *media and digital literacy, media habits, online risks and harm, legislation and national strategies*. It also presents a set of *Good Practice* examples - initiatives conducted in the country in various areas of activity (political, educational, security), focused on promoting young people's skills and online safety.

By examining existing data, this report aims to equip readers with a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding pre-adolescents' interactions with digital media in the Portuguese context. It also aims to provide valuable insights to contribute to the ongoing discussion on pre-adolescents, digital media and online safety, presenting a basis for informed decision-making and critical reflection.

1. Statistical data

1.1. A general overview of digitalization in Portugal's media habits

The internet and mobile devices are gradually taking an increasingly important place in people's daily lives. They are a fundamental part of professional, personal and educational routines, and important elements of the leisure time people enjoy at home or elsewhere on the move. Statistics on the Portuguese context have been showing this growing relevance and although data from statistical sources exclusively focused on the pre-adolescent age group are scarce, a set of sources provides a basis to portray and reflect upon the national scenario.

In 2021, the resident population in Portugal was 10,361,831 individuals, of which around 489,903 were aged between 10 and 14 years old - 10.5% of the national population¹. According to The Digital and Society Index (DESI) report 2022, Portugal ranked 14th in the "Human Capital" Dimension and in the "Digital Public Services" Dimension, 12th in the "Integration of Digital Technologies" Dimension, and 18th in the "Connectivity" Dimension. In the overall index, Portugal was in 15th place among the 27 EU member states, one position above the result of the previous year's edition (European Commission, 2023). Although the results showed improvements in digitalisation, this growth was lower than in other EU countries. This report also pointed out that more than half of the Portuguese population had basic or above basic digital skills to use digital media in various contexts (European Commission, 2023). This aspect is in line with the efforts of the political agenda to make digital skills and citizens' digital empowerment one of the priorities until 2030 and which is noted in several national initiatives developed under the INCoDe.2030 Strategy – the integrated public policy initiative dedicated to strengthening digital skills currently in force in the country.

1.2. Internet, digital equipment and use of social networks

In 2019, data from the National Statistical Institute's Survey on Household Use of Information and Communication Technologies pointed out that around 80.9% of households in Portugal had internet access at home and that the proportion of internet users in the country was increasing - 76.2% of residents in Portugal aged 16-74 reported having used the internet in the previous year (INE, 2019). However, the report warned that a gap remained when compared with the EU-28 average – Portugal was 12 percentage points below the European average. Additionally, the ICT Use Survey data highlighted that four out of five national users were actively participating in social media – a proportion noted to be higher than the EU-28 average (close to two-thirds). Younger people were signalled as those who most accessed the internet and digital media and mobile phone or smartphone were the preferred devices (INE, 2019). Already that year there was a marked growth in mobile internet access - 82.5% of users use mobile media to access the internet (INE, 2019).

¹ https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_indicadores&contecto=pi&indOcorrCod=0011628&selTab=tab0

Data for 2020, deeply marked by the pandemic context, highlighted a 3-percentage point increase in the percentage of internet users compared to 2019 (INE, 2020). INE underlined that in this period the population aged 16 to 74 years used the internet and digital media with the main purpose of communicating and accessing information (INE, 2020). Also, in this period, and due to the context of isolation experienced, activities related to education were those that recorded the greatest increase. The proportions of users who communicated with teachers or colleagues through educational portals (from 14.5% in 2019 to 30.8%) and who attended online courses (from 7.7% to 18.0%) doubled during 2020 (INE, 2020).

The results of the survey on ICT use by households in 2022 showed the growing importance of media in different contexts. The data collected reinforced the importance of Internet access in mobility and mobile means: households with children up to 15 years old continue to have higher rates of Internet access (99.2%) and broadband access (97.0%) than the generality of households in 2022 (INE, 2022). Households with children are those which access the Internet more (99.2% vs 85.7), both in terms of fixed Internet (95.6% vs 79.7%) and mobile Internet (63% vs 45.1%). A general look at the population shows that 81.8% of people aged 16 to 74 used a mobile phone or smartphone to access the internet (INE, 2022).

As far as uses are concerned, INE (National Statistics Institute) data show that the internet continues to be used mainly by people aged 16-74 to communicate and access information. The individuals surveyed in this study mentioned that the most frequent activities were exchanging instant messages (via WhatsApp, Messenger, etc.), 91.8%, and participating in social networks, 79% (INE, 2022). It should be noted that, despite showing a positive evolution compared to 2021, activities associated with civic or political participation are those which continue to have a lower participation of Internet users: only one fifth revealed having expressed their opinion on a topic on websites or social networks and 13.9% participated in consultations or voting (INE, 2022). Still regarding the data presented by the report for the year 2022, these pointed to a trend of accumulating old or obsolete devices at home - 76.3% of internet users kept at home at least one computer equipment that they no longer use, mainly mobile phones or smartphones and laptops or tablets (66.4%) (INE, 2022). Additionally, environmental concerns seem to be weighing on electronic equipment purchase decisions – more than half of internet users (58.6%) report having taken into account aspects related to environmental impact during the purchase of new computer equipment (INE, 2022).

2. National research on social media and preadolescents

As previously mentioned, research specifically focused on media and digital practices of Portuguese pre-adolescents and their relationship with social media is still scarce. Several factors make this a poorly studied age group. Firstly, there is a tendency for youth-focused studies to aggregate the several age groups. Secondly, studies that focus on these issues tend to research children up to 10 years old or adolescents, to the detriment of the age group that is commonly located between 9 and 12 years old. And finally, reaching out to this group is usually difficult due to the laws, regulations and bureaucracy required to conduct studies with these young people, including in the school context. Also, the fact that social media networks require the legal age of 13 years as minimum age to create a profile poses ethical issues to selected participants and research these specific age groups.

But in a world where homes, schools and various other contexts are equipped with digital technologies that accompany every step taken by individuals of all generations, studies carried out in the last 6-7 years (from 2015 onwards) have been providing relevant insights on young people's media practices. These studies have been reflecting mainly on media uses and habits, digital literacy and citizenship, and dangers and risky behaviours.

2.1. Media and digital literacy competencies

Taking the Portuguese context, the national results (Ponte & Batista, 2019) of the EU Kids Online (EUKO) project² indicate that children aged 9 years old and above already have wide access to various digital media, including smartphones, computers and tablets. In the 9-10 age group, the smartphone is the most frequently used device, followed by the tablet. In the 11-12 age group, while the smartphone remains the preferred medium, the desktop/laptop becomes the second most used device. This trend continues in the 13-14 and 15-17 year-old age groups. Tablet use decreases as age increases. Pre-adolescents report spending an average of 1.8 hours (9-10 year olds) and 2.5 hours (11-12 years olds) on the Internet daily. In these age groups the preferred activities reported are listening to music, watching videos, communicating with family and friends, playing online games and visiting social networks. Compared to the data collected in 2014, the 2018 report reveals that the use of social media in their daily lives by pre-teens (as well as the other age groups) had been increasing in the space of four years.

In terms of skills, the EUKO Portugal report (Ponte & Batista, 2019) underlines that instrumental and communication skills – such as saving photos or changing privacy settings or knowing what to share online – are reported to be the skills young people believe to master. However, they feel less confident regarding the mastery of creative and informational skills – such as creating or editing online content, checking the veracity of information found on the Internet, and doing keyword searches. The report also adds that crossing skills with age and gender, younger ages (9-12) are less confident users. The skills improve with age and gender also matters, as boys see themselves as more competent dominating the instrumental and creativity areas, while girls seem to perform best in the critical and

² Within this project, 1974 Portuguese children answered the questionnaire that was applied.

social skills. The results of the European ySKILLS³ project, which intends to enhance and maximise long-term positive impact of the digital environment among children and young people between 12 and 17 years old (the longitudinal questionnaire⁴ being applied in 2021 (Ponte et al., 2022a) and 2022 (Ponte et al., 2022b)), are in line with the data collected by EUKO – communication and technical skills stand out, but they still struggle to master creative and information skills, with gender differences. Boys report confidence in technical and information competences, and girls see themselves as more proficient in the communication and creative domains. There is a predominance of communication and entertainment activities in the use of digital media, and the space of social networks in the lives of young people is growing. Factors such as age, parental mediation, access are positively related to the mastery of digital skills and knowledge. Internet access continues to be more frequent from smartphones and computers. Most teens and pre-teens report accessing the Internet from home, and girls tend to use the Internet longer than boys (4 hours vs. 3.7 hours). Preferred activities continue to be those related to socialising, communication and entertainment.

These studies have also been delving into the critical understanding skills of media literacy. EUKO online results show that pre-teens tend to agree that they can trust most of the news they choose to read or watch, and that they positively self-assess their social and mobile digital media skills – such as knowing what information to share online or removing people from contact lists, installing apps, buying apps online, etc – with more girls reporting positively on these skills. The results of this study and of the ySKILLS project indicate that information (e.g. find and verify the reliability and the credibility of information) and creative skills (e.g. using apps to edit videos and photos; creating stories) are the ones that pre-teens least report mastering. Thus, EUKO and ySKILLS studies reinforce what other studies at national, European and international levels have been suggesting: regarding the use of digital media, children and young people maintain patterns more related with consumption (for entertaining, passing the time, socialising) rather than exploring producing and creative skills.

Specifically regarding the use of social networks, an article published in 2020 by Rebelo, Lopes, Macedo & Salgado, resulting from an observational and cross-sectional study carried out through the completion of anonymous questionnaires to students underlines that the use of social networks starts between the ages of 10 and 12. In her PhD study with children aged 10-12, Castro (2015) found the same trend, and in line with her results, she adds:

“Interesting is that society seems to accept that these digital devices babysit children but then get all surprised and suspicious when young people choose the computer instead of having fun outdoors, or when they use the online devices to: i) talk with strangers; ii) learn about sex; iii) involve in sexual experiments; iv) engage in self-harm practices or unhealthy eating behaviours or v) harass others. The so-called ‘digital natives’ or ‘net generation’ are growing in a wired rapidly changing, complex and ambiguous world and their digital trends reinforce the generation gap between adults and children. Therefore, despite entitling themselves experts in digital matters (Ponte & Cardoso, 2008), we are not all that sure they are using the

³ The ySkills project is a European, longitudinal project that seeks to study the digital skills of children and adolescents in six European countries. The project started in 2020 and will end in December 2023. More information is available at <https://yskills.eu/>

⁴ Within the scope of the ySkills project, 1017 children responded to the longitudinal questionnaire applied in 2021 and 956 to the questionnaire applied in 2022.

online digital opportunities wisely. But certainly, they are using them differently.” (Castro & Osório, 2015)

And in this regard “children’s online experiences are not a black and white reality” (Castro & Osório, 2015, 45). In fact, children are:

“bombarded with information and lectures about Internet security and what adults instil in them. During the stay in the field, we got the feeling that the young participants knew all the politically correct answers, but they weren’t always able of analyse and evaluate about given situations. There’s a false sense of security on children’s judgement regarding their online choices. It’s like they memorised the alphabet, but, not always, are they capable of building words, and sentences. Adults tend to trust in recipes, but handbooks don’t teach much about how to create empathy, resilience, respect, responsibility, and feelings... Recipes don’t help children to deal with a low self-esteem or frustration. Sometimes what they say does not match what they do. For instance, they claim it’s wrong to talk with strangers, but they do not bother to learn more about it or adjust the privacy settings on their social networking site profile, disregarding that their pictures can fall into paedophile rings, or stay forever in the network. During the sessions we have noticed that the threats of most concern to them are identity theft, misuse of personal information, cyberbullying, pornography, and the possibility of someone hurting them (kidnapping, rapping).” (Castro & Osório, 2015, p. 45-46)

2.2. Dangers, Risks and Harmful consequences of the use of digital media

Research conducted in 2016-2017 by De-Barros Ventura, Rodríguez-Garcia and Sola Reche (2018) aimed to identify the incidence of cyberbullying among young people aged 11-17 years. 739 students were surveyed about various experiences of aggression. The data reveal that 19.5% of the respondents had been victims of cyberbullying. There are also gender differences when it comes to the type of aggression (De-Barros et al., 2018). Males are more frequently victims of password theft, dissemination of unauthorised personal information (24.5%), defamation (when a person tries to hurt the reputation of someone, in this case using digital artefacts) (25.9%), publication of videos or photos without consent (25.2%) and exclusion from groups and online games (23.1%). In turn, female individuals are more frequently the target of threats, insults, offences and extortion of intimate photographs (De-Barros et al., 2018). As for the aggressions most frequently promoted through the media, the data collected through the questionnaire reveal that they are sexting (40%) and threats through messages/emails or offences through the net (34.2%) (De-Barros et al., 2018).

Regarding the most frequent type of aggression in the 11 to 14 year old age group, and although the De-Barros and colleagues (2018) point out several convergences with the results obtained in the 15 to 17 year old age group, it is noticed that there is a higher appearance of aggression related to offending through electronic media (83.2%), distribution of intimate photos (67.3%), insults through e-mail or messages (62.4%) and threats through the same media (62.4%). The same questionnaire points out that very often, victims of cyberbullying are also victims of bullying (75.2%), with 76.1% of the victims managing to identify the bully, although in the case of cyberbullying the crime can often be committed without the identity being revealed. The aggressors are most frequently school colleagues (53.7%), friends (45.4%), or classmates (42.6%) (De-Barros et al., 2018). Overall, the national average prevalence of cyberbullying in these groups of students stands at 19.5%, constituting a national

problem that has a deep effect in the Portuguese educational context, as other research has previously pointed out (De-Barros et al., 2018).

The use of digital and internet-connected tools is usually associated with risky situations and contexts of socio-digital disadvantage (Brites & Castro, 2022), with about 25% of children aged between 9 and 10 years questioned in the EUKO survey having experienced disturbing situations online: bullying, confrontation with violent or sexual content, among others. The results also show that negative feelings towards these situations decrease as children and young people get older (EUKO 2018 report, Ponte & Batista, 2019). This corroborates the EUKO network's well-known premise that more access and use is associated with skills and resilience building. It is also a condition to more exposure to risk online, however, it does not imply in a cause-effect direction that these experiences will result in harmful outcomes. Thus, risk is “a calculation based on the probability and severity of harm” (Livingstone, 2013, p. 13) but does not imply that harm will follow (Livingstone et al., 2011); and harm is defined as “actual physical or mental damage” (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014, p. 8; Staksrud et al., 2013).

The EUKO report (Ponte & Batista, 2019) also revealed that cyberbullying predominates over face-to-face bullying – more than a fifth of those who suffer or suffered from this type of aggressions indicated that it occurs several times a month, through mobile calls, text messages, dissemination through social media of unpleasant comments, and threats. According to the same report, 64% of victims of online bullying reported that the messages were unpleasant and hurtful. 1 in 6 young persons, victims of cyberbullying, admitted to have done things against their will (16%). When comparing data from the surveys EUKO 2010, Net Children Go Mobile in 2014, and EUKO 2018, there is a clear rise of online bullying reported. Taken together, these figures have more than doubled in 2018 compared to 2010 and 2014 (Ponte & Batista, 2019).

With regards to the confrontation with sexual content, the final national report of EUKO (Ponte & Batista, 2019) warns that sending and receiving sexual messages starts at a young age, from 11 years old. In addition, from this age children already report exposure to user-generated content related to violent content and images against people or animals, self-mutilation, hate messages, drug use, incitement to anorexia and ways to commit suicide. These abuses reveal that gender matters. Girls are the ones who report feeling less safe and having more doubts about what to do when faced with unpleasant situations online.

An article by Ponte, Ferreira and Cardoso (2020), arising from EUKO survey results, reveals that for the 9 to 12 age group, the content that most bothers pre-adolescents online is unwanted content in general, scary or disgusting content or unsolicited commercial content. As for the behaviours that bother them the most, bullying people and talking bad on them, are the most mentioned.

Data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) 2017/2018 (WHO, 2020) points out that the number of Portuguese pre-adolescents aged 11 and 13 who report intensive use of electronic media is above average. The data also show that pre-teens have a preference for using digital media over other media (WHO, 2020). The report also highlights that as online communication becomes an integral part of teens' and pre-adolescents' lives, problematic use has been on the rise, including social media addiction (WHO, 2020). These situations of addiction tend to increase as age also increases. In Portugal, in the 11-year-old age group the country is in 30th place in the international ranking, in the 13-year-old age group the country rises to 17th place (WHO, 2020).

Another aspect that is underlined in the literature is the fact that the contact with strangers tends to start early, from 10 – 11 years of age (Rebelo et al, 2020) and preadolescents tend to omit dangerous situations they experience in online contexts from their parents. This is also corroborated by Castro and Ponte (2020) when analysing pre-adolescents' perspectives on how they perceive and react to parental intervention on their digital uses. According to the authors, content and contact risks tend to fuel parents' anxieties, who when feeling disempowered in these matter as gatekeepers tend to be more restrictive.

However, if parents' main concerns about children's digital activity seem to remain more stable over the years, children's concerns are more up-to-date, sophisticated. In their own words, they worry about being cyberbullied, strangers accessing their personal information, being tracked by localisation software, someone guessing their password, being victims of webcam hacking, being contacted by strangers, finding pornography, being abducted (when meeting online contacts), identity theft, online impersonation and being blackmailed over a personal picture. These examples prove how children's concerns are more wide-ranging and complex, mirroring technological advances and the embeddedness of digital culture in their daily lives and interactions (Castro & Ponte, 2020, p.381).

3. Good practice examples

By placing the promotion of media and digital literacy skills of citizens of different age groups at the top of national priorities, over the past two decades several initiatives have emerged. From actions aimed at alerting the general population to the importance of critical reading of the media, to initiatives targeting audiences in school contexts and more focused on promoting safety and reducing risky behaviours online, below is a list of initiatives that due to their impact and timeliness may be considered Best Practices.

3.1. Alerta Premika! Risco online detetado

[Alerta Premika! Risco online detetado](#) [Premika Alert! Online risk detected] is a set of books which are the result of the collaboration of Teresa Sofia Castro (between 2017-2021) with Instituto de Apoio à Criança (IAC) and two other authors (Cláudia Manata and Raquel Palermo). It is an output of her European Doctorate (funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, FCT from 2011-2015).

The first volume is about the digital challenges of social media (e.g. contact with strangers, oversharing on social media, online grooming, sexual content), and the second volume is about online gaming (e.g. cyberbullying, game addiction, meeting people online, hacking). Centro Internet Segura e EU Kids Online (Portugal) are supporting partners of the collection.



Figure 1: Covers of the books

The books are based on research, conversations and situations lived and shared by pre-adolescents. The books give these children a voice about matters that concern them and mirror real everyday life digital situations. Premika is a bionic being (a sort of imaginary friend) that communicates

telepathically with the pre-teen in trouble making noises and changing colour – the colours are associated with positive and negative emotions. The books allow other children and adults to enter in the plot by actively deciding how the narrative develops with good or bad consequences. The story has six different endings.

The books are educational resources that aim to bring generations together in a reflexive dialogue to promote a positive approach and a responsible, healthy, civic, and secure use of digital technologies. At the end of the book, the reader can find safety tips and a glossary to understand the digital slang used by children in the story. The books are available in several bookstores.

3.2. Centro Internet Segura

The [Centro Internet Segura](#) [Portuguese Safer Internet Centre; PT SIC] was created in 2007 and nowadays is a partnership of seven organisations⁵. Its core work and expertise are relevant in a threefold perspective: (i) making the Internet a safer place; (ii) enhancing citizen's awareness on online subjects; (iii) scaffolding citizen's digital competencies.

PT SIC offers collective expertise with experience covering the latest state of the art on children, young people and technology, cybersecurity, digital citizenship, emergent risks, and opportunities online; and access to children and young people from diverse regions (urban and rural), and diverse socio-economic status and vulnerabilities.

Besides participating actively in several European Conferences and International Forums (e.g. IGF – Internet Governance Forum; EuroDIG; International Conference “Keeping Children and Young People Safe Online”, Warsaw, Poland; Public Consultation from the European Commission “Have your say! How to make Europe's Digital Decade fit for children and young people?” and the #DigitalDecade4T»YOUth Campaign), some members in the Advisory Board integrate the initiatives Global Kids Online, EU Kids Online, Net Children Go Mobile and ySKILLS.

At the national level, the consortium has held several relevant and impactful initiatives over the past decade:

- **Digital competences and digitization of schools** (The XXII Constitutional Government 2019-2023 Program; The Digital Transition Action Plan, approved by the Council of Ministers in April 2020, including measure 1 - school's digitization program);
- **Teachers, trainers and technicians' digital skills development for digital transformation** (The Digital Transition Action Plan, approved by the Council of Ministers in April 2020);
- Preventing and Combating Bullying and Cyberbullying: teachers training, provision of resources and awareness campaigns for schools (The National Plan (since October 2019): “School Without Bullying. School Without Violence”);
- Citizenship Education in schools in its 17 different domains (The National Strategy for The Digital Citizenship);

⁵ The consortium is composed by: Centro Nacional de Cibersegurança; Direção-Geral da Educação; Fundação Altice; Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima; Instituto Português do Desporto e Juventude; Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, and Microsoft Portugal.

- Media Education in preschool, primary, lower, up-lower and secondary education (The Media Education Guidance);
- **Basic and secondary ICT education curricula** (The Law-Decree No. 55/2018 that establishes the basic and secondary education curricula and the guiding principles for learning assessment);
- Development of competencies and skills in young for the digital transformation and jobs of the future (Portugal INCoDe.2030 National Initiative launched in April 2017);
- **Development of awareness, digital trust, and a cybersecurity culture** (The Portuguese National Cybersecurity Centre and Direção-Geral da Educação, contributes to the INCoDe.2030 Initiative, namely regarding Axis 2 - Education);
- **Mitigating digital exclusion and social isolation in Covid pandemic** (Within INCoDe.2030 framework, the initiative “Somos Tod@s Digitais” was developed to help the Portuguese population with less digital skills to better deal with the situation of digital exclusion and social isolation);
- **Security of Cyberspace for all citizens** (the National Strategy for the Security of Cyberspace);
- **Youth policy for transformation** (“National Youth Plan” that embodies the international references of the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe, the European Union (EU), the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) and the International Youth Organization for Ibero-America);
- **Hotline and Helpline** (The main aim is the protection/empowerment of children/young people, not only in growing up to be digitally literate, but also to resort to information/support when in perceived danger or in the aftermath of victimization).

3.3. Centro Internet Segura Helpline and Hotline

Centro Internet Segura’s [Safer internet Centre] Helpline and Hotline Services are integrated at the very heart of APAV’s [Portuguese Association for Victim Support] 75 community-based services, holding a very close and complimentary cooperation. The Safer Internet Helpline ensures anonymous and confidential support to the use of technologies, being its primary aim to provide support to victims of cybercrime and advise users to adopt safe behaviours while using the internet. The Hotline, in its turn, offers a set of means through which citizens may report illegal content found online, namely contents related to online child sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse material, as well as contents that incite to violence and/or racism. It is, thus, important to highlight that APAV’s operation of both the Helpline and Hotline is an asset due to this strict cooperation with APAV’s intervention model 75 community-based services, with special highlight to the CARE Network for Specialised Support to Children and Youngsters Victims of Sexual Violence and to the UAVMD Network of Specialised Support to Migrant Victims and Victims of Discrimination. The CARE Network, for instances, is of national scope and is not only prepared and specialised in supporting children and youngsters’ victims of sexual violence that might be identified through the Hotline. This network also has a close cooperation with the Criminal Police, the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences, other community-based NGO’s, public entities (such as the Commissions of Protection of Children at Risk) and the local law enforcement agencies.

3.4. Digital Literacy and Education national report (2014-July 2016)

This [report](#) is an output of the Cost Action IS1401 – Strengthening Europeans' capabilities by establishing the European literacy network (ELN). It provides a guide and maps concepts, actions, initiatives, and strategies related to digital literacy in the national context. The document, which is aimed at a general audience but mainly at educators, also presents a listing of activities carried out at a national level aimed at audiences in educational settings that aim to promote digital literacy. In addition, it presents a reflection and clues for the future based on a set of Good Practices identified in the country. The coordinator of the Portuguese ASAP team, Maria José Brites, coordinated this publication.

3.5. Direção-geral da Educação and Seguranet

The [Directorate-General for Education](#) (Direção-geral da Educação, DGE) collaborates with several reference entities, such as Universities, National and European specialists and researchers, Radio and National TV, the Journalist's Union, Informal Media Literacy Group (GILM), Municipalities and Intermunicipal Communities, the General Prosecutors' Office Cabinet for Cybercrime, the National Data Protection Commission, the Child's Support Institute, the Portuguese consumer's organisation, among other institutions.

Through the SeguraNet Awareness Centre, DGE has been promoting, since 2004, Digital Citizenship and Media Education in Schools. SeguraNet's activity is focused on developing quality online content aimed at children and young people; raising their awareness, prevention and training; promoting a safer online environment and combating sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Besides this, the SeguraNet Awareness Centre organises campaigns and awareness-raising sessions and teacher training.

In the scope of the SeguraNet Awareness Centre, DGE takes part of the National Cyberspace Security Strategy working group coordinated by the National Security Office and involving other national reference entities.

3.6. Líderes Digitais

[Líderes Digitais](#) [Digital Leaders] is a program for Portuguese schools that aims to give a voice and actively involve students in dynamics that contribute to training confident citizens who are able to deal with the digital challenges, in a safe and responsible way. During the school year, teams of students (from 9 to 18 years old), accompanied by a teacher and with the support of SeguraNet Awareness Centre and ICT Competence Centres, develop awareness-raising initiatives related to Digital Citizenship, aimed at the educational community to which they belong. The Digital Leaders also play the role of Safer Internet Centre young advisers.

Several Portuguese Digital Leaders have actively participated in PAN-EU Youth Panel initiatives. These young people representatives have also participated in the Safer Internet Forum, the Internet Government Forum, among other international meetings. Coming from different regions across Europe, they share their ideas on different issues related to modern media and digital lives through blogs and other sections of the Pan-EU Youth website, as well as through participation as Insafe youth representatives in international events.

3.7. Media Education Guidance

Approved by the Secretary of State for Basic and Secondary Education on April 29, 2014, the [Media Education Guidance](#) emerged with the main mission of being a guiding guide for the pedagogical work focused on Media Education in the context of formal education. According to the document, the introduction of Media Education in schools shouldn't be done by conducting single and generalist initiatives – it is essential to look at Media Education in a transversal and transdisciplinary perspective (Pereira, Pinto, Madureira, Pombo, & Guedes, 2014).

By understanding children and young people as consumers and producers of media with growing weight in the contemporary social context, the document presents specific proposals for each educational level, easy to adapt to the context where they are implemented. Its organisation also reflects these concerns. Structured in twelve themes, with sub-themes and specific learning objectives, the Media Education Guidance aims to guide educators in the task of educating for the media, highlighting essential areas and themes, as well as expected learning outcomes. The document explores, among others, themes related to digital networks, the social constructions arising from the media, the relationship of individuals with the media and freedom and ethics, rights and duties.

3.8. MyGender project

[MyGender](#) is a national project developed with funding from the Portuguese Science Foundation. This project is the first one in Portuguese context that intends to research “how young adults engage with the technicity and imaginaries of mobile applications, incorporating them into their daily lives, embodying them in their everyday practices and (re)negotiating from them their gender and sexual identities”. Within the scope of the project, educational and training materials are also provided in free access to educators. In 2022, MyGender launched the booklet “CYBERBULLYING – Booklet For Teachers Of Primary And Secondary Education”. Using simple and accessible language, this publication is aimed at teachers and provides an overview of the concept, types and impact of cyberbullying. It also highlights the role of adults in dealing with cyberbullying in educational contexts. The booklet is available on the [project's website](#).

3.9. National Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Young People at Risk

The National Commission for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Young People at Risk is a public body responsible for the support of all the children in vulnerable situations. This institution has been conducting and supporting for several years nationwide training workshops related to digital rights and safety, both with children and also with adults. It has also been organising special events under the scope of the Violent Abuse Prevention Month. This relationship has been running for years and PT SIC will keep collaborating with the Commission during the next funding period.

Among its other activities, The Commission works closely with PT SIC and with the Programa Escolhas⁶, and promoted by the High Commission for Migration (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações), runs several Digital Inclusion Centres for vulnerable groups all over Portugal and in other countries.

⁶ Programa Escolhas [Choices Program] is a national government program, created in 2001, currently under the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Equality and Migrations and integrated in the High Commission for Migration (ACM, I.P.). Its

3.10. MOOC Cidadão Cibersocial

[Cidadão Cibersocial](#) [Cyber-social Citizen] is an interactive online course, useful for everyone who wants to learn more about social media – its phenomena, advantages, and risks. It is organised into five modules:

- Module 1: Social media, popularity and attractiveness.
- Module 2: Privacy, security and personal data.
- Module 3: Netiquette, wellness and digital reputation.
- Module 4: Influencers, influence and marketing.
- Module 5: Final activities.

At the end of each module, participants can test their knowledge and, upon completion of all the modules of the course, they can download their Certificate of Completion. Other MOOCs are available on the website, including the ones titled [Cyber-safe Citizen](#), [Cyber-informed Citizen](#) and [Cyber-safe Consumer](#).

One of the ASAP Portugal team members (Teresa Sofia Castro) designed this MOOC, aiming at citizens aged over 14 years old. The course was designed based on up-to-date literature, social needs identified in the field, and data from recent research, mainly the results of the European project [ySKILLS](#).

3.11. Other online resources and initiatives

There are also other initiatives that can be pointed to as good practices and that are available to the general population:

- [Stop Bullying](#) project
- [Cyberbullying.pt](#) Telesummit
- Association [No Bully Portugal](#)
- MOOC “[Bullying e cyberbullying: prevenir e agir dá-lhe respostas! Saiba como reconhecer os sinais de alerta e como intervir!](#)”
- [Bullying.pt](#) project

mission is to promote social integration, equal opportunities in education and employment, combating social discrimination, civic participation and strengthening social cohesion. It is aimed at all children and young people, particularly those from contexts of socio-economic vulnerability. It is structured in three intervention areas: 1) Education, Digital Inclusion, Training and Qualification; 2) Employment and Entrepreneurship; 3) Community Stimulation, Health, Participation and Citizenship.

4. Legislation and regulation

In Portugal, although there is no specific law focused on cyberbullying, several documents contemplate criminal practices committed online, namely:

- The **Tutelary Educational Law (Law 166/1999 of 14 September)** applies to any young person between the ages of 12 and 16 who commits an act qualified by law as a crime. It presents and specifies needs for receiving education about legal issues.
- The **Student Statute and School Ethics (Law No. 51/2012 of 5 September)** establishes the rights and duties of students in basic and secondary education and the commitment of parents or guardians and other members of the educational community in their education and training.

Along with these, Portugal is governed by international regulations, namely European Commission directives. Particularly noteworthy in the context of children and digital rights is the **General Comment no. 25 on the Rights of Children in relation to the digital environment**. The document details the various ways in which the Convention on the Rights of the Child applies to the digital world, stressing not only the rights that must be considered – such as the rights to access information, freedom of expression, privacy and data protection, digital literacy, among others – but also the importance of promoting opportunities to empower children to recognize their rights and, therefore, to use digital media in a conscious, responsible and safe way. Particularly considering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, namely the increased use of digital technologies among children and the greater emphasis of existing inequalities, the General Comment emphasises access to digital technologies as a fundamental right for children and a crucial issue for ensuring the right to participation.

The Committee also stresses the urgency of finding a balance between protection and empowerment pointing out that while ensuring access to digital technologies, it should be ensured that it is meaningful and safe (UN, 2021, para. 4) and that children's voices are valued and listened to (UN, 2021, para. 16). Only then will digital technologies be serving the purpose of connecting children to the world, helping them safe access to different services and environments, and facilitating their participation in civic and cultural activities.

4.1. National strategies in the field of media and digital literacy

In the Portuguese context, the concern with the promotion and introduction of information technologies in education arose in the mid-1980's (with the Minerva Project⁷) and since then the Portuguese Government has carried out various policies and incentive programs (de Almeida, de Almeida Alves & Delicado, 2011) to promote ICT access in schools. Given the importance placed on computer literacy in the Information Age (Holloway & Valentine, 2003), in 2007 the Portuguese government, following the lines of action outlined in the Lisbon Strategy and the Education and

⁷ The Minerva Project was a project of the Portuguese Ministry of Education, which ran from 1985 to 1994. Its purpose was to introduce Information and Communication Technologies, commonly known as ICT in primary and secondary schools.

Training 2010 Programme and the Technological Plan for Education (PTE⁸), promoted e-inclusion through the nationwide program “e-escolinha” (www.pte.gov.pt) stimulating the purchasing of low-cost laptops (Magalhães laptop) and mobile broadband connections by families.

In 2011 the National Council of Education published a Recommendation on Education for Media Literacy where it suggested the introduction of Media Education in the area of Education for Citizenship in a transversal way and through extracurricular activities. The recommendation also underlined the urgency of training teachers and educators to be able to work media literacy skills in their contexts.

More recently, in 2017 the National Digital Skills Initiative e.2030, Portugal INCoDe.2030, was launched. As stated on the initiative’s website, five strategic areas are covered, including education, aiming to guarantee the education of children and youth through the promotion of digital literacy and digital competences, in a lifelong learning perspective.

In 2019, the Observatory of Digital Competences was created. The institution’s main goal was to collect and analyse data regarding digital skills, as well as to contribute to the production of knowledge in the digital field and the social and economic impacts of the digital markets⁹.

In the 2019/20 school year, the Ministry of Education challenged schools to draft and implement a plan to combat bullying and cyberbullying. On 20 October 2020, the World Day Against Bullying, the schools awarded with the “Escola Sem Bullying | Escola Sem Violência” [‘School Without Bullying | School Without Violence’] label were known. Fifty-two institutions were certified for having promoted and implemented a Plan to Prevent and Combat Bullying and Cyberbullying in the 2019/2020 school year. The "Plan to Prevent and Combat Bullying and Cyberbullying" continued to be promoted in schools giving rise to the creation of the "Committee to Monitor the Fight against Bullying and Cyberbullying in Schools". As part of this initiative, a [platform](#) was launched, providing resources to guide and provide content and materials for schools to implement their prevention plans.

Under the National Strategy to prevent and fight Bullying and Cyberbullying other campaigns and initiatives were implemented, such as the MOOC on Bullying and Cyberbullying – launched in 2018.

⁸ The aim of PTE (2007) was to put Portugal among the five European countries more advanced in terms of technological modernization of schools by 2010.

⁹ <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/115652962>

5. Conclusions

The data presented in this report underline the importance of promoting reflections focused on online safety issues, of preventing the negative impact of risky behaviour and of containing the spread of offensive behaviour in online contexts. In this sense, several aspects are highlighted.

- Despite the lack of national studies with special focus on the pre-adolescent age group, the analysis presented in this country report reveals that in general the young people have access to digital media. We also know that in the beginning of the century owning a laptop was the meaning of having the privilege to access online products and services, more recent data proves that handheld, digital connected devices opened the door for digital communication, entertainment, and all sorts of positive or negative interactions. Reports such as EUKO have been detailing three major trends that keep increasing over time: 1) children and young people's screen time; 2) exposure to risks begins sooner; 3) creative and information skills are abilities that children and young people report to have more difficulties in mastering¹⁰. Regardless of the marked increase in media use noted in the last three years, due to the pandemic and the shift to distance learning, the most recent data indicate that these are the areas in which young people show the most deficiencies.
- At the Portuguese level, we identified a set of good practices that point to a growing attention to media and digital literacy, not only from the Government but also from partnerships between academia, child protection services and the community itself. Some of these initiatives, also involve youth, valuing their place as active agents in their own positive development and empowerment. During our research, we identified diverse initiatives and formats arising from various sectors focused on the development of media and digital skills of the general population (from younger to older individuals). The activities and initiatives developed by the education sector have a special focus on younger generations and teachers, which emphasises the importance of school setting and educational actors in these processes.
- The escalating efforts conducted in Portugal begun in the early 1980s and recently culminated in the development of several initiatives, namely the National Digital Skills Initiative e.2030, Portugal INCoDe.2030, Digital transition (aimed to train teachers' digital competencies), all targeting the acquisition of digital literacy and providing venues to develop digital competences skills of the population, in a lifelong learning perspective.

It is also important to make note that, although no specific law has been established, efforts are underway to regulate cases of online crime, particularly cyberbullying. The work conducted under this research project can provide rich data and inputs to contribute positively to the development of new guidelines, orientations and regulations addressing these issues.

¹⁰ Data collected pre-COVID times. It is expected that in the next 1-2 years a new survey is implemented by EUKO.

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DESK RESEARCH

This report is part of the Erasmus+ project ASAP – *A Systemic Approach to social media and pre-adolescents through thinking skills education*.

It presents key findings from desk research conducted in Portugal with students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. The study explores the challenges of digital life in early adolescence and the educational needs of all involved.

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