



## EAPRO

**Our Lives Online: Use of social media by children and adolescents in East Asia – opportunities, risks and harms**

# How can understanding children's online behaviour inform protection strategies in East Asia?

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## EDITORIAL INSIGHT

Reviewers commended this piece of research for its innovative appraisal of social media use in the East Asia region, its focus on hard-to-reach children and its child-centred perspective, giving voice to children and providing them with appropriate mechanisms to share their experiences.

Reviewers also valued the study's design, its presentation of nuanced findings – outlining necessary trade-offs in a stimulating manner – and its attempt to change how we understand the issue of social media in a child's life, by balancing both risks and opportunities. In the context of COVID-19 and the expansion of online experiences for children worldwide, the study was considered by reviewers to have significant potential for policy impact.

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Young people attend the 2019 Asia Children's Summit.



One in three internet users is a child, and every day more than 175,000 children go online for the first time. Social media platforms are central to children's daily lives, but while online platforms can provide a gateway to opportunity, they can also expose children to potential abuse and exploitation, including cyberbullying, grooming and 'sextortion.'

Despite the prevalence of internet use by children and adolescents in East Asia, little is known about how they engage with online technology or their understanding of risks. Even less is known about online engagement among children from hard-to-reach groups. Understanding how children interact with social media, their perceptions of risk and the steps they take to mitigate online risks is essential to the development of effective strategies to prevent and address online sexual abuse and exploitation.

In 2019, the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) led a pioneering study with the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) to plug gaps in the understanding of online behavioural patterns of children in East Asia.

## PURPOSE

Although existing survey data broadly describe social media use by young people, this study aimed to provide a holistic and nuanced understanding of everyday practice. In this way, it sought to identify how children in East Asia could most effectively benefit from support and interventions to mitigate online risks.

Specifically, the research explored the following questions:

- How are children in East Asia using social media applications?
- What opportunities are children accessing online?
- What risks do children face online, and how do these relate to risks in the offline environment, across different social groups?
- What measures exist in the region to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse online, and what protective factors can reduce harm and foster resilience?
- How can children's rights be more effectively protected and promoted online?

A primary goal of the work was to interview children usually excluded from this type of research. In capturing the experiences of children from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand on their use of social media and online safety, the study explicitly attempted to include the voices of marginalized and vulnerable children.

## APPROACH

The study comprised two components: a comprehensive desk review undertaken prior to commencement of primary data collection, and in-country data collection, using a primarily qualitative approach.

**You know what is happening all over the world, even when you're not there.**

– Student from refugee school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



### A child-centred perspective

Taking a child-centred, participatory approach, the researchers interviewed 301 social media users aged 11–19 across the four countries. Of this total, 121 participants were from marginalized and 'hard-to-reach' groups, including children with disabilities, children living or working on the street, refugee children, juvenile offenders, and children who had survived sexual exploitation or trafficking. An important facet of the methodology was to involve in-country youth leaders as focus group facilitators.

**TABLE 1**  
**Total participants by country and gender**

COUNTRY	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL
Malaysia	69	58	127
Indonesia	55	22	77
Cambodia	22	39	61
Thailand	17	19	36
Total	163	138	301

Source: Authors' calculations from attendance sheets.

Qualitative data were also supplemented by a confidential, anonymous, self-administered questionnaire about negative experiences online. This offered children an opportunity to safely disclose sensitive or upsetting experiences, and provided an indication of exposure to and interaction with online sexual content.

Children's privacy, well-being and safety were prioritized throughout. Focus group discussions followed a protocol designed in line with the Global Kids Online methodology and previous CJCP work, and approved by an international ethics review board.

The research was framed within the socioecological approach, which layers interventions in terms of the community and systems in a child's life. As such, frontline practitioners (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, teachers, youth activists), parents, caregivers and grandparents, and policymakers were also interviewed. Local internet service providers and software application developers were also consulted.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Online behaviour and social media use

Nearly all research participants reported having access to a smartphone, irrespective of their economic situation and vulnerability profile. While high-speed broadband is relatively inexpensive in East Asia, cost was still identified as a barrier. Children are resourceful in their attempts to get online – for example, sharing wireless hotspots and logging into school wireless networks, despite official restrictions.



**TABLE 2****Smartphone ownership and social media use among internet users aged 16–24 years**

COUNTRY	SMARTPHONE OWNERSHIP	SOCIAL MEDIA USE
Cambodia	48.0%	48.0%
Indonesia	98.3%	90.7%
Malaysia	99.7%	87.8%
Thailand	98.7%	90.1%

Source: Global Media Intelligence Report 2018, eMarketer, New York; Mobile Phones and Internet Use in Cambodia 2016, Open Institute, USAID's Development Innovations, and the Asia Foundation.

Social media use is widespread. Many children reported managing multiple accounts – public and private – across different groups of friends, family and acquaintances.

Social media is primarily used for information-seeking, communication and entertainment. Children reported using social media applications for 'general education' (e.g., how to dance, cook, craft or learn English). Gaming is popular with children at all economic levels. A major attraction of social media for children is the opportunity to meet people beyond their immediate environment, including potential romantic partners.

Demonstrating how social media can open up opportunities for marginalized children, children with disabilities reported that such platforms enable them to form friendships and relationships with other children like them. Similarly, refugee children reported being able to maintain contact with families and friends.

In Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia, older teenagers reported using virtual private networks to access websites blocked for political, moral or religious reasons (e.g., international news and social news sites). Others use social media to generate income through the sale/resale of goods, and many use online platforms to express themselves, share content they have developed and explore creative pursuits.

**The majority of focus group participants, regardless of gender, reported encountering some form of adverse experiences online.**

- Research report

### Risks, harms and online protection

About two thirds of girls and boys, regardless of social strata, reported adverse or upsetting experiences online, ranging from cyberbullying to attempts at sexual exploitation. Two in five focus group participants said they would not want to tell anyone about bad experiences online.

Adolescents in all four countries reported having been contacted online by strangers. Unlike frontline practitioners and caregivers, however, children do not inextricably associate the word 'stranger' with danger. Most did not consider someone they met online a stranger unless they had engaged in 'creepy' behaviour. The default is for children to accept chat and friend requests from strangers, particularly women, only to block them if the conversation is steered in a direction the child dislikes. Only a few children had reported such negative experiences to their peers, parents or other trusted adults.

Both girls and boys reported that they had been sent sexual messages and images via social media. Around 1 in 20 children had unwillingly shared sexually explicit photos or videos of themselves, though most children resisted or blocked unsolicited requests of this nature. More than half of the adolescent focus group participants had met offline someone whom they had initially met online. Among those willing to share



their experiences, such meetings were for the most part benign, involving someone of their own age who went to a school locally, or other peers.

However, teachers and counsellors recounted incidents of children being kidnapped, abused or killed by people they had met online. Boys in an emergency centre in Bangkok, Thailand, who had been sexually exploited, explained the role that social media had played in meeting 'clients' and selling sex, live streaming and cybersex. Children in juvenile shelters shared their experiences of surviving trafficking attempts by strangers met online.

Self-harm linked to social media use was highlighted by practitioners and a few focus group participants. Girls and boys described carving a former romantic partner's name on their arm or leg, which they had then photographed and shared on social media. Counsellors and social workers in Cambodia, Indonesia and Malaysia reported that LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) children are especially vulnerable to self-harm.

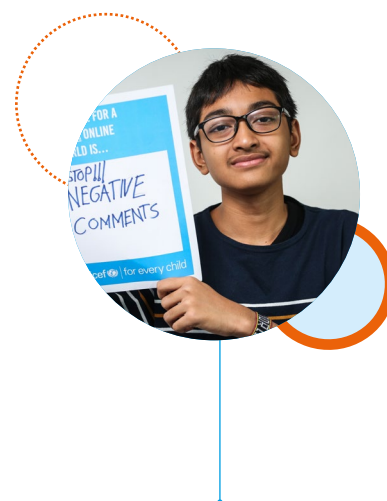
The issue of bullying, specifically cyberbullying, was a lesser concern for interviewed children. While some spoke of being upset when witnessing bullying online, the bullying did not seem to be usually directed at them, rather at their peers. Both children and frontline professionals highlighted incidents of cyberbullying related to racism and sexuality.

In all four countries, social workers, educators and other frontline professionals expressed similar concerns regarding potential risks of abuse associated with engaging with strangers, as well as the risks of excessive screen time and exposure to extreme violence online, through both gaming and videos. Psychologists and social workers noted the tension between social media platforms both isolating children in the online world and providing a platform for support, particularly for marginalized groups.

Psychologists also highlighted the risks of online gaming. Gaming platforms such as PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds and Mobile Legends were experienced by children as an opportunity to connect and unwind. Psychologists viewed seeking online validation from peers as potentially harmful however, especially for children for whom this rarely occurs offline (e.g., for autistic children).

Parents, caregivers and teachers were found to typically respond to online risk by restricting children's internet access or confiscating phones, rather than engaging children in conversation to help them to manage risks.

Questions about data privacy revealed the broadest differences between children and adults in awareness and understanding. Overall, children are more focused on contextual privacy than data privacy. Most reported that their parents are unaware of their multiple, private accounts – a way for children to control which areas of their lives they want keep private from their parents. Educators demonstrated a lack of understanding about online privacy and protection.



**He said, you're going to die tonight, so I went private.**

– Boy, aged 14, describing his experience on Instagram, Jakarta, Indonesia







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School friends look at a smartphone as they have lunch at a restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

### BOX 1

#### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT SAFE INTERNET USE AMONG CHILDREN

- Ensure that strategies and programmes to tackle online risks align with national and regional frameworks to address violence against children.
- Improve support for digital parenting, by integrating technology and social media into national parenting strategies and by building digital literacy skills among parents and caregivers.
- Ensure that interventions are based on evidence of patterns of use, and of 'what works' in keeping children safe.
- Foster offline resilience among children to improve their coping mechanisms, conflict resolution skills and social skills both offline and online.
- Urge technology companies to responsibly promote safe use of their platforms, including making profiles private, restricting communications to 'friends only' by default and restricting sharing/receipt of content to contact list members.
- Establish data systems to monitor progress and establish benchmarks, with data disaggregated by gender, age, location and key socioeconomic variables.



## INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

The research report was launched at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Conference on Child Online Protection in February 2020. Discussions included how to implement the Declaration on the Protection of Children from all Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN (2019). The research will inform the realization of the Declaration, including through shaping the Regional Plan of Action on the Protection of Children from all Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse, currently under development.

The research findings have also prompted the design of a regional social media campaign on key online risks for children and young people. This covers the risks of online grooming, sextortion and self-generated images, as well as recommendations on how to keep safe online. The campaign, fronted by pop star and UNICEF EAPRO Regional Ambassador Siwon Choi, went live in the run-up to the report launch. Furthermore, UNICEF EAPRO, in collaboration with the CJCP, used the research findings in early 2020 to shape key messages and guidance on the COVID-19 pandemic, both for young people and for parents and caregivers.

## LOOKING AHEAD

A key recommendation of the research report is to ensure that responses by teachers, caregivers and other adults to protect children's safety online are based on 'what works'. The research findings are contributing to a major UNICEF regional initiative to understand what works for messaging and educational materials to help children in East Asia protect themselves online. Launched in 2020, in collaboration with a think tank comprising leading institutions, academics, non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and private sector partners, the initiative will generate new evidence of how children use online platforms, and perceive and mitigate risks. Securing this in-depth understanding will help to maximize the efficacy of investments in keeping children safe online.



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