



How Online Role Models, Gaming, and Social Media Affect Youth with Special Needs in the Areas of Time Spent and Finances

Country: Ireland

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Activity 1: Examine - Desk Research

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1. Introduction

This national report examines the impact of online role models, gaming, and social media on youth with special needs in Ireland, focusing on time spent and financial implications. The research utilises secondary data from government reports, academic studies, industry reports, and news articles. The target group includes youth with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and other special educational needs.

2. Gaming

2.1 Relevant Games and Platforms

Research Question:

- **What kind of games on which platforms are played by the target groups?**
 - Youth with special needs in Ireland engage in various games across different platforms. Popular games include Minecraft, Fortnite, Roblox, FIFA, and Animal Crossing. These games are played on consoles (PlayStation, Xbox), smartphones, and computers.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023).

2.2 Target Group Demographics and Behaviour when Gaming including Time Spent

Research Questions:

- **Who plays which games?**
 - Studies indicate a higher percentage of males engaging in gaming, though females are increasingly active. Youth with special needs participate similarly across different regions in Ireland.
- **How many in the target group play these games?**
 - There is significant engagement, with many reporting regular gaming habits.
- **When/how much time do youth spend playing these games?**
 - On average, youth spend about 1-3 hours per day on gaming, with spikes during weekends and holidays.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023).

2.3 Financial and Further Impact of Gaming

Research Questions:

- **What are the costs and cost structure of these games?**
 - Costs include initial game purchases, in-app purchases, and subscription services (e.g., Xbox Live, PlayStation Plus).

(Baker, 2023)

- **How much money does the target group spend on these games?**
 - Monthly spending can range from €10 to €50, depending on game types and engagement levels.

(MABS, 2022)

- **What are the known outcomes of the target group playing these games?**
 - Engaging in gaming activities can lead to several beneficial effects, such as improved hand-eye coordination, enhanced problem-solving skills, and better strategic thinking. Many games encourage teamwork and communication, which can significantly boost social skills, helping young people with special needs to develop friendships and improve their ability to work collaboratively in group settings. These activities also offer a sense of achievement and can enhance cognitive development by challenging players with various puzzles and tasks.
 - Meanwhile, excessive gaming can lead to potential issues such as addiction, where the compulsive need to play games interferes with daily life activities and responsibilities. This can also result in reduced physical activity, contributing to health problems such as obesity and related conditions. Additionally, prolonged screen time can negatively impact mental health, leading to issues like anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances. It is essential to monitor gaming habits to mitigate these risks and ensure a balanced approach to gaming and other activities.

(Granic, Lobel, & Engels, 2014)

3. Social Media

3.1 Relevant Social Media Channels and Social Media Functions

Research Question:

- **On which social platforms are the target group active?**
 - Popular platforms among the target group include TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram. Users engage in watching and producing content, texting, and socialising.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023)

3.2 Target Group Demographics and Behaviour on Social Media including Time Spent

Research Questions:

- **Who is active on the channels?**
 - Both genders are active, with slight variations in platform preference. For example, TikTok and Instagram are popular among females, while YouTube and Snapchat have a more balanced demographic.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023)

- **How many in the target group are active on these media?**
 - Exact statistics on young people with special needs in Ireland who use social media are not readily available. However, general data indicates that a high percentage of young people, including those with special needs, are active on social media. Approximately 89% of children aged 8-12 and 95% of teens aged 13-17 use social media daily. While specific numbers for those with special needs are not detailed, reports suggest that this group also engages with social media due to its benefits in social connection and access to resources.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023)

- **When/how much time do youth spend on social media?**

- Average usage is about 2-4 hours daily, with higher usage during evenings and weekends.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023).

3.3 Financial and Further Impact of Social Media Consumption

Research Questions:

- **What are the costs and cost structure of these platforms relevant to the target group?**
 - Costs primarily come from data usage, subscription fees, and in-app purchases. Most social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) are free to use. They generate revenue through advertising rather than charging users directly. Some platforms offer in-app purchases for additional features or virtual goods (e.g., Snapchat's filters or games within social media apps).
- **How much money does the target group spend on social media?**
 - Monthly spending is typically lower than gaming, around €5 to €30.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023).

- **What are the known outcomes of the target group being on social media?**
 - Positive outcomes of social media use for young people with special needs include enhanced access to information and social connections. Social media platforms provide valuable resources and information that can help individuals with special needs stay informed about various topics, including health, education, and support services. They also offer a means to connect with communities and support networks that might not be readily available offline. These platforms can facilitate interaction with peers, mentors, and advocates who share similar experiences or interests, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging.
 - However, there are also notable negatives associated with social media use. One significant concern is the exposure to cyberbullying, which can have severe emotional and psychological impacts. Young people with special needs may be particularly vulnerable to online harassment, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation or low self-esteem. Additionally, social media

can contribute to unrealistic social comparisons. Users are often exposed to idealised portrayals of others' lives, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy or self-doubt. These comparisons can affect mental well-being and exacerbate existing challenges, especially for individuals who are already managing social or developmental difficulties.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023)

4. Role Models

4.1 Role Model Types and Values

Research Questions:

- **What kind of role models do youth with special needs gravitate towards?**
 - Youth with special needs in Ireland often gravitate towards role models who offer relatability, inspiration, and advocacy. Role models with shared experiences, such as individuals with similar disabilities who have achieved success, provide hope and demonstrate what is possible. Advocates and activists who work for disability rights empower young people by highlighting the importance of inclusion. Successful individuals in various fields show that achievements are attainable despite challenges. Family members and caregivers who offer consistent support and understanding play a crucial role. Community leaders and educators who foster inclusive environments also serve as impactful role models. Finally, media and entertainment figures who portray disabilities positively can offer validation and broaden perspectives.
 - Role models include social media influencers, athletes, and celebrities.

Examples include:

- Seán William McLoughlin (“@Jacksepticeye”) – A gamer who posts YouTube videos and also discusses his experiences with ADHD.
- Roz Purcell (“@rozannapurcell”) – Wellbeing influencer who promotes positive health and fitness habits after struggling with ill mental health.
- Niamh McCarthy (“@niamhmacdiscus”) - A Paralympic athlete in field athletics who has won medals and inspires with her achievements in sports.
- Sinead Burke (“@thhesineadburke”) - Disability rights advocate and fashion scholar who promotes inclusivity and accessibility in various sectors.

- David Whelan (“@davewhelenunbreakable”) - Disability rights activist who works to improve accessibility and raise awareness about disability issues.

(Harris, 2019 / CyberSafeKids, 2023)

- **What kind of values do these role models stand for?**

- These role models embody values that profoundly impact young people with special needs. They stand for perseverance and resilience, demonstrated through overcoming significant personal and professional challenges. They champion advocacy and inclusivity, working to improve accessibility and representation across various fields. Additionally, they emphasise empowerment and authenticity, fostering understanding and providing genuine, relatable perspectives. Together, these values inspire and support young people by promoting resilience, advocating for equality, and encouraging a more inclusive society.

(Harris, 2019)

4.2 Potential Impact of Role Models on Target Group

Research Questions:

- **What kind of impact do these role models have?**

- Role models significantly influence fashion, language, and behaviour.
- Financially, they can drive spending on branded merchandise and online content.
- These role models impact youth with special needs in Ireland by offering inspiration through their achievements, showing that success is attainable despite challenges.
- They raise awareness and advocate for disability rights, promoting inclusion and accessibility. Their personal stories provide relatability and validation, helping young people feel understood and connected.
- Positive representation in media and entertainment helps combat stereotypes and broaden societal perspectives.
- They serve to empower young people by demonstrating resilience, promoting self-advocacy, and encouraging a more inclusive society.

(Harris, 2019)

5. Legal Framework and Environment

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

Research Question:

- **What is the legal framework for protecting the target group and youth in general from the consequences of gaming and social media?**
 - The Irish government has implemented the *Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill* to protect young users. Key points include mandatory digital platform safety measures and non-compliance penalties (Seanad Éireann, 2022).
 - Ireland's laws around gaming are designed to strike a balance between promoting innovation and creativity in the gaming industry, while also protecting consumers and preventing harmful content. The Irish government has taken a proactive approach to regulating gaming, with the establishment of the *Irish Film Classification Office* (IFCO) tasked with classifying video games and determining age ratings (Linehan, 2021). Additionally, the *Gaming and Lotteries Act of 1956*, later amended in 2019, provides a legal framework for certain types of gaming activities, while more recent laws, such as the *Consumer Rights Act of 2015*, later amended in 2022, seek to protect the rights of gamers (Citizens Information, 2023; Irish Statute Book, 2023). Furthermore, Ireland's membership in the European Union means that it must comply with EU laws surrounding gaming, such as those related to data privacy and anti-competitive practices.

5.2 Highlights and Issues with the Legal Framework

Research Questions:

- **What are the issues here?**
 - Challenges include enforcement difficulties and keeping legislation updated with rapid technological changes. Positives include a proactive stance and continuous improvements based on feedback. As the gaming industry continues to grow and evolve, the legal framework surrounding it will likely continue to adapt to ensure that it remains fair, safe, and enjoyable for all.

(Government of Ireland, 2023)

5.3 Cyber Criminality as an Aspect of Financial Impact

Research Questions:

- **How extensive is the issue and impact of cyber criminality for this specific target group and what is done to protect them?**
 - Cyber criminality poses a significant risk to young people with special needs in Ireland, often increasing their vulnerability to online harassment and exploitation. This impact can lead to severe emotional and psychological effects, including anxiety and depression.
 - To address these issues, Ireland **has implemented** protective measures such as educational programmes **through** organisations **such as** CyberSafeKids, which focuses on digital literacy and online safety. Support services, including helplines and counseling, offer assistance to victims.
 - **Government** policies and regulations, such as GDPR, aim to safeguard young people.
 - **Schools** and community initiatives promote safe online practices and provide guidance on managing cyber threats.

(CyberSafeKids, 2023)

6. Best Practice Providers

6.1 Best Practice 1: CyberSafeKids

Provider: CyberSafeKids

Description:

Offers workshops and resources on online safety, specifically targeting young people and those with special needs.

Website: <https://www.cybersafekids.ie/>

6.2 Best Practice 2: Webwise

Provider: Webwise

Description:

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/>

6.3 Choice and Reflection

Reflection:

Both providers are selected for their comprehensive programmes, tailored content for special needs, and lack of commercial influence. They effectively address financial and time management issues associated with digital use.

7. Summary Discussion and Outlook

Summary:

The research demonstrates the substantial involvement of young people with special needs in gaming and social media platforms. This engagement has notable financial and time-related impacts, reflecting the growing presence of these activities in their daily lives. Key challenges identified include the necessity for robust legal protections to safeguard this vulnerable group from online threats and the imperative for effective educational initiatives to help them navigate digital environments safely. The data highlights that while digital platforms offer significant benefits, including social connections and learning opportunities, they also pose risks such as exposure to cyberbullying and online exploitation. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes enhancing legal safeguards, developing targeted educational programs, and promoting safe and responsible online behaviour.

Outlook:

Future efforts should prioritise several key areas to better support young people with special needs in the digital age. Enhancing digital literacy is crucial, equipping them with the skills needed to understand and manage online risks effectively. Strengthening legal frameworks is essential to provide better protection against online threats and ensure that appropriate measures are in place to address any breaches of privacy or safety. Additionally, promoting healthy online habits through education and support will help young people make informed choices and engage positively with digital platforms. These combined efforts aim to create a safer and more supportive online environment, ensuring that the digital world remains a valuable and enriching space for young people with special needs.

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