

Policy Briefing Paper

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

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Topic, Context and Methodology

In recent years, digital gaming and social media have significantly reshaped how young people spend their time, engage socially, and manage their finances. While much attention has been given to digital competence and online safety among youth in general, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific impacts on young people with additional needs - particularly in relation to time management and financial behaviour.

In 2024, the project “Mapping the Financial and Time Loss Impact of Gaming and Social Media on Young People with Special Needs”—abbreviated FITING4YOU—was launched by project partners [Jugendförderverein Parchim/Lübz e. V.](#) (Germany), [MMT Academics](#) (Germany), and [Future in Perspective](#) (Ireland). The initiative aims to better understand the challenges faced by this group and to identify effective methods for supporting them in managing their time and money online.

The project was designed to increase the availability of evidence and provide recommendations for policymakers, educators, and parents, while contributing to broader awareness and understanding. For the purpose of this paper, young people with additional needs - such as due to learning impairments - are referred to as the target group.

The research was conducted in three stages in the years 2024 and 2025:

- (1) Desk Research: An analysis of existing data on the online financial and time-use behaviours of the target group, focusing on both EU-wide information and in-depth insights from Germany and Ireland.
- (2) Interviews: Forty in-depth interviews were conducted with members of the target group – 20 in Ireland and 20 in Germany, exploring their digital habits in relation to time and money.
- (3) Workshops: Based on the findings from stages one and two, tailored workshops were developed and delivered to 28 participants from the target group. These sessions aimed to deepen insight, test proposed methodologies, and assess the impact of workshop-based interventions.

The participant groups reflected a balanced distribution in terms of gender and age, with participant age ranging from 14 to 30 years.

Given the project's aim to investigate a complex and under-researched topic, the methodological approach prioritised qualitative depth and contextual understanding over large-scale data collection. As such, the findings should be regarded as exploratory and indicative—intended to inform further research, guide policy development, and support the design of targeted educational interventions.

Central Findings

Why is the Target Group Online?

The target group is drawn to online spaces—particularly social media and gaming—for entertainment, aesthetics, challenge, learning, and maintaining social connections purposes. For some, being online is also a way to pass time and manage feelings of loneliness or boredom.

Time Spent Online

Limited access to physical spaces (due to rural living), low motivation, or lack of attractive offline alternatives contribute to some youth spending up to twelve hours online daily. Others, particularly in Ireland, report more moderate use of online media (0–2 hours per day for gaming and social media respectively). Nonetheless, most participants report that online activity has at least occasionally caused them to be late, sleep less, feel tired, upset, or neglect schoolwork—indicating at least intermittent negative impacts on the target group as a whole.

Gaming

All participants engage in online gaming. Many popular games are initially free but include frequent monetisation and advertising, suggesting a heightened influence on spending behaviours.

There is a trend towards games with violent content among males. These game types have, in some studies, been linked to aggressive offline behaviours. Game choice may shape the outcomes of online activity for the target group.

Online Influencers and Social Media

While many claim not to be influenced by online personalities, 68% of workshop participants reported buying products after encountering them in games or on social media. Despite low self-reported engagement with influencers, awareness of specific figures and brands is high. Some participants admit purchasing influencer-endorsed products - suggesting subconscious influence on values and consumer behaviour. Furthermore, the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and cost of the products.

Money Spent Online

Reported online spending ranges widely - from no spending to thousands of euros, with some individuals using all their available funds online. A few participants expressed discomfort when disclosing spending habits. One participant noted, “I spent too much online – I will not tell you how much. Then my parents put a stop to it.” However, many, especially in the Irish groups, reported to spend €20 or less per month on social media and gaming.

It was also evident that a number of young people exhibited a preference for watching advertisements in order to unlock particular content within the game. This represents a subtle form of influence that does not incur any direct costs, yet has the capacity to influence consumer behaviour in the long term.

Frameworks and Education are Helpful

Legal frameworks such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Digital Services Act (DSA), and the Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) system provide valuable protections. For instance, one person spent four hours longer than planned on social media the night before the workshop because the app provides 'endless' suitable content.

The potential effectiveness of banning addictive features is supported by study findings. Educational workshops have proven effective in increasing self-awareness of online behaviour, though there is a clear need for more age-appropriate materials and providers. Participants also noted that structured activities, education, and rules - whether legal or imposed by parents or teachers - help moderate online time and spending.

Safety online

Workshop participants reported both experiencing and engaging in harmful online behaviour, including cyberbullying and loss of access to game accounts or items, underscoring the need for continued focus on online safety.

Data Collection is Difficult

Young people themselves find it challenging to estimate their online time and expenditure accurately. Additionally, the information provided by the young people was varied, reflecting a wide spectrum of behaviours—from severe overuse and financial impact to moderate, informed internet use. This finding is indicative of the heterogeneity that characterises the target group.

Recommended Action

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

Sustainable support for offline hobbies and social networks

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

Prioritize early, accessible digital education

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

Improve and implement legislative framework

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

Support families and educators as gatekeepers

Sensitisation and knowledge transfer for parents and guardians, school-based regulation, and educator training as essential tools in managing time and money spent online.

Improve mobility and infrastructure in rural areas

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

Deliver reflection-based workshops

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

Conduct comprehensive, long-term studies on youth digital spending

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

Leverage cross-country learning

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

Project Materials

All materials are available at <https://www.jfv-pch.de/eu-projekt-fiting4you.html>.

Handout for professionals and parents: ‘Supporting Young People with Additional Needs in Managing Gaming and Social Media’

Handout for young people: ‘Tips for Using Games and Social Media in a Moderate Way’

Final report: ‘FITING4YOU Final Report: Mapping the Financial and Time loss Impact of Gaming and Social Media on Young People with Additional Needs’

Detailed reports from the workshops, interviews and desk research.



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