MENRE

Strengthening the mental resilience of youth in dealing with crises presented on social media

Country-specific Report from Germany

Activity 1

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Relevance of the Topic for the Target Groups

This document has been drafted by MMT Academics for the project MENRE – STRENGHENING THE MENTAL RESILIENCE OF YOUTH IN DEALING WITH CRISES PRESENTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA, 2024-3-DE04-KA210-YOU-000294460, which has been co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

Alarming findings about the mental health of young people in Germany have made headlines in recent months and years. Reports indicate that adolescents are facing psychological challenges on a scale rarely seen before.

The DAK “Children and Youth Report” (Witte et al. 2023) already reported in 2021 a rise in diagnoses of depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders, particularly among girls aged 15 to 17. It emphasizes that mental health issues are widespread and increasingly affect a large proportion of adolescents, especially girls. Since the onset of the pandemic, diagnosis rates for psychological disorders have risen significantly.

Numerous studies and reports recognize (e.g., Witte et al. 2023; Schnetzer et al. 2024; WHO 2024) the link between the high psychological strain currently observed among young people and the multiple ongoing crises since the COVID-19 pandemic, which have triggered persistent feelings of instability, powerlessness, and uncertainty.

The “Shell Youth Study” (Albert et al. 2024) reported that, in early 2024, 81% of young people aged 12 to 25 expressed fear of a war in Europe. Additionally, 67% were concerned about the economic situation, 63% feared climate change, and 64% were apprehensive about growing hostility among people. Similarly, the “Jugend in Deutschland” trend study (Schnetzer et al. 2024) found in summer 2024 that 65% of young people aged 14 to 29 were worried about inflation, 60% about wars in Europe and the Middle East, 54% about high or scarce housing, and 49% each about social polarization and climate change.

Peter and Asbrand (2025: 298) highlight that children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable in the context of socio-ecological crises. They are more susceptible to the harmful effects of such crises, often possess fewer coping resources, and are dependent on adults

and institutions, which can exacerbate the potential impact. Young people also tend to perceive global developments with heightened concern. Those most at risk include adolescents lacking a stable family environment, children and youth with refugee experiences, and young people who are socially marginalized due to poverty or other factors.

According to Schnetzer et al. (2024) crises are experienced more intensely by young people via social media than ever before, with significant implications for their well-being, sense of security, and optimism regarding the future. A journalistic article by Kixmüller (2024), published in a German daily newspaper, describes how adolescents perceive crises (e.g. war, pandemic) more intensely and unfiltered through social media, affecting their anxiety about the future. According to this article, the rise in psychological stress among many people in Germany is largely because recent crises have come much closer to everyday life. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, for example, are far more tangible in daily life than those of previous emergencies. These events not only trigger individual fears but also have the potential to leave a lasting mark on collective consciousness (ibid.).

There is a growing corpus of studies highlighting the connection between increasing psychological stress and the rising use of digital media, as problematic and unreflective social media use can negatively affect young people's mental well-being[1]. This is particularly important because social media often exposes young people to unfiltered crisis-related content, which they may consume without context or proper interpretation.

Peter and Asbrand (2025: 298) highlight that, in times of increasing societal and global crises with direct local repercussions, schools and other social institutions function as crucial stabilizing structures. Peter and Asbrand (ibid.) focus in their study on stress-coping strategies and the development of positive learning environments, but they do not specifically address the role of social media or the impact of crisis-related online content. Nevertheless, their work can provide a foundation for formulating practical recommendations for youth

[1] According to the WHO (2024) rise in problematic social media use among adolescents is a serious concern due to its impact on development. Adolescents engaging in problematic use report lower psychological and social well-being, higher substance use, reduced sleep, and later bedtimes, which can harm health and academic performance. Persistently high social media engagement may have long-term consequences for their overall well-being.

workers within the MENRE project, helping them support young people in dealing with crisis-related content on social media.

1.2 Research Objectives

The aim of this country-specific report is to present the types of crisis-related content that young people in Germany engage with on social media and to identify the associated social, emotional, and mental effects. It also seeks to highlight best-practice educational offerings in Germany that support young people in using crisis-related content on social media critically and responsibly.

The research conducted for the purpose of this report is intended to contribute to the targeted support and preparation of young people. Based in this research, the consortium will develop recommendations and propose pedagogical practices that strengthen young people's resilience and their ability to critically and consciously engage with digital content on social media, especially content related to crises or emotionally challenging topics.

In addition, this research will help broaden the scope of action for youth workers and educators by providing them with specialized knowledge and practical recommendations. These insights will support digital media education, such as guiding young people in managing online content, and promote the development of critical thinking skills. These recommendations will be designed to be applicable across national contexts.

1.3 Definition of Key Terms

1.3.1 Crisis Content

Crises are situations or life circumstances that cannot be managed effectively in the moment. In this paper, crisis content refers to material on social media, such as posts, images, videos, articles, or stories, that present, discuss, or react to events involving significant danger, disruption, or distress. These may include natural disasters, wars, pandemics, violence, political unrest, mental health struggles, or personal tragedies.

Crisis-related content is often emotionally intense and may evoke fear, grief, anger, or anxiety. It can be highly disruptive, as it reflects events that challenge social, emotional, or

mental stability. Due to its disturbing nature, such content is frequently shared and spreads rapidly, sometimes without proper verification. It may also include graphic images or videos. Often, this content is framed through personal experiences or fears to create a stronger emotional impact on viewers.

1.3.2 Psychosocial Impact

In the context of this report, psychosocial impact refers to the combined psychological and social effects that crisis content on social media can have on young people. It describes how exposure to such content influences a young person's mental health, emotional well-being, behaviour, social relationships, and overall functioning within environments such as school, family, and peer groups.

1.4 Research Methodology

Within the framework of Activity 1 of the MENRE project, comprehensive desk research was conducted as an initial step. The online research draws on contributions from a wide range of sources, including scientific research papers and studies, survey findings, academic journal articles, and interviews with experts, as well as newspaper articles to illustrate the media presence of the topic. This review focused primarily on German sources to map the discourse surrounding crisis-related content on social media. Together, these materials help illuminate the discourse surrounding crisis-related content on social media and its effects on young people. They also serve as a foundation for developing educational offerings and formulating recommendations for the MENRE project.

In a second step, following a survey jointly developed with the consortium, fifteen young people aged 14-17 participated in the study. The anonymized surveys were distributed in paper format. Participation in the surveys was on a voluntary basis.

In a third step, four youth workers were interviewed using a set of questions developed by the consortium. The youth workers received the project description and the interview guidelines via email and could voluntarily choose to participate in the interview. The interviews were conducted by telephone and were not recorded. During the interviews, note-

taking was minimized to maintain focus on the conversation. After the interviews, detailed memory protocols were prepared in order to preserve as much information as possible.

1.5 Involved Target Groups

In Activity 1 two target groups were involved: young people and youth workers.

Young people

A total of 15 young people participated in the survey on a voluntary basis. Although the participants did not provide age information in the survey itself, the survey administrator verified that all respondents were between 14 and 17 years old. Regarding gender distribution, nine respondents were male and six were female. Five participants reported living in rural areas and four in a city; it should be noted that not all participants answered the question concerning their place of residence.

Youth workers

In total, four interviews were carried out with youth workers. Youth workers selected for the interviews were those with experience working with young people and who demonstrated openness to the topic. Among the interviewed participants, three were female and one was male.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Relevant Psychological Theories

2.1.1 Theories Explaining the Impact of Social Media on Young People

In the desk research for this report Gerbner´s Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al. 1980) was encountered as relevant to explain the impact of social media on young people in the context of crisis content. This Theory, from the field of media psychology and communication studies, examines how long-term media exposure shapes people’s beliefs about reality.

Gerbner argues that repeated and sustained exposure to media content gradually cultivates audiences' perceptions of the world, leading them to believe that reality resembles the media's portrayal. The theory emphasizes that cultivation does not result from one single video or message, but from slow, cumulative influence over time. Because media repeatedly present narrative patterns involving danger, conflict, and risk, these patterns eventually come to feel like objective reality.

One of Gerbner's central findings is the "mean world syndrome": constant exposure to violent or threatening content makes individuals believe that the world is more dangerous, more hostile, and more unpredictable than it actually is.

In the context of Gerbner's theory, exposure to crisis content or continuous crisis-related news on social media may contribute to the cultivation of fear-based worldviews. The world may appear permanently unstable ("war everywhere," "one crisis after another"), which can increase chronic anxiety or pessimism ("we have no future"). Such content may also reinforce the belief that crises are constant and unavoidable. Algorithms further intensify this effect by repeatedly showing similar content, leading to even stronger cultivation. Adolescents, who are still developing cognitive models of the world, are particularly susceptible to these cultivation effects.

In the following section, empirical data from interviews with youth workers conducted as part of the MENRE project are used to illustrate and support the application of Gerbner's Cultivation Theory to crisis-related content on social media.

Based on the interviews, Gerbner's theory appears highly relevant for analyzing the effects of crisis-related content, as one interviewee stated:

> Young people are exposed to a constant stream of such content, which triggers anxiety and worry and strongly affects their emotional well-being. There is a great deal of uncertainty about the future, and many often appear distracted or absent-minded.

Another interviewee described their observations of young people: When adolescents are constantly confronted with crisis-related content on social media, it frequently elicits feelings of helplessness, which in turn can reinforce pessimistic views of the future.

Another youth worker reported that social media often take over the emotional regulation of young people because they frequently present simple answers to complex questions. These short videos also influence young people's attitudes and future perspectives. She described it as follows:

> In the areas of self-harm or drug use, many different children and adolescents reported that their attitudes and behaviors are reinforced by corresponding content. Similarly, in the areas of racism, antisemitism, sexism, and war crimes, the media take over the emotional guidance of young people. Opinion formation becomes "easier," providing simple answers to complex questions, which in turn can temporarily increase well-being.

Furthermore, she points out that on social media, the constant exposure to intense and condensed content can lead to an increase in anxiety and worry.

Another youth worker reported that the extent to which young people are influenced depends largely on their personality. Many rarely question what they see on social media, nor do they discuss it much with others. Individual susceptibility to content plays a crucial role. Additionally, adolescents bring learned behavioral patterns from their family environment. In the context of this interview, Gerbner's theory does not fully explain these dynamics. Consequently, an alternative theory is presented here, which incorporates the available research findings in a more comprehensive manner.

2.1.2 Theories Related to How to Cope with Stress

In the desk research for this report Witte´s Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) (Witte 1992; Witte 1994) was encountered as relevant to explain the impact of social media on young people in the context of crisis content.

The Extended Parallel Process Model, developed within the fields of health communication and psychology, explains how individuals respond to fear-inducing messages. The model proposes that fear appeals can trigger two fundamentally different response pathways: danger control and fear control. Danger control reflects a constructive, problem-focused reaction in which individuals direct their attention toward the threat and attempt to reduce or avoid it. This response occurs when people believe they can take effective action. In contrast, fear control involves a maladaptive, emotion-focused reaction in which individuals

try to manage their fear rather than the threat itself. Fear control responses occur when the threat feels overwhelming and coping resources appear insufficient, often resulting in avoidance, denial, or emotional distress (Witte 1992; Witte 1998).

According to EPPM, these reactions are shaped by two cognitive appraisals. First, threat appraisal involves assessing the perceived severity of the danger and one's personal susceptibility to it. If perceived threat is low, individuals typically show minimal emotional or behavioral response; if perceived threat is high, fear is activated. Second, efficacy appraisal consists of evaluating both self-efficacy (the belief in one's ability to perform the recommended actions) and response efficacy (the belief that those actions will be effective). Adaptive, danger-control responses occur only when perceived efficacy exceeds perceived threat, whereas fear-control responses dominate when fear outweighs efficacy (Witte 1994; Witte and Allen 2000).

When applied to youth engagement with social-media crisis content, EPPM suggests that these accounts often heighten perceived threat while offering limited or no coping information. This imbalance increases the likelihood of fear-control responses, especially in adolescents who possess fewer cognitive and emotional regulation resources. Typical outcomes include feelings of helplessness, heightened anxiety, emotional overload, avoidance behaviors, and compulsive monitoring or “doomscrolling” as an attempt to regain control. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable due to ongoing neurodevelopment of the prefrontal cortex, limited life experience for evaluating efficacy, and the amplifying influence of peers and social comparison. Consequently, EPPM predicts that crisis content lacking coping strategies fosters fear-control responses and contributes to declining mental well-being among young users (Witte 1998; Witte and Allen 2000).

In the following section, empirical data from interviews with youth workers conducted as part of the MENRE project are used to illustrate and support the application of EPPM to crisis-related content on social media.

A youth worker observed that adolescents often appear depressed, frustrated, and helpless, frequently feeling overwhelmed because they are not yet able to cope with certain content. They lack answers, as they do not yet possess the necessary knowledge. Many also do not have sufficient resources, such as the opportunity to discuss issues with their parents. Their worries are negatively affected by crisis-related content and can reinforce each other, as adolescents do not yet have the same mental “frameworks” or structures as adults in midlife.

Developmentally, they are often not yet capable of this. Many then seek exchange with others or allies to recognize that they are not alone with distressing thoughts or problems. Her observations also show that adolescents engage critically with complex topics, with some discussing these issues at home and receiving support from their parents in interpreting the content.

3 Types of Crisis Content on Social Media

Kaman et al. (2025) point out that the COVID-19 pandemic placed substantial psychological strain on young people. At the same time, children and adolescents have had limited opportunities to recover, as they continue to be confronted with new crises and stressors. Ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East, economic uncertainty, and the intensifying climate crisis further compromise their mental well-being and may contribute to increased future anxiety, anger, frustration, hopelessness, and sadness. In addition, heightened media coverage and the constant availability of crisis-related content on social media shape how young people perceive these developments and influence their emotional responses.

Exposure to ongoing crises on social media is amplified by the increasing dependence on these platforms as sources of news. According to data from the “Reuters Institute Digital News Report” (Behre et al. 2023), 14% of adult internet users identify platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as their primary source of online news; among 18- to 24-year-olds, this proportion rises to 35%. These findings underscores a broader trend in which younger users increasingly turn to social media to inform themselves about political and societal developments.

According to data collected within the framework of the MENRE project, the majority of responses fell in the 1–2 hours media use per day category, with 1 response for Facebook, 6 for TikTok, and 3 each for Instagram and YouTube. The second most common category was using social media 3-4 hours per day, with 1 response for TikTok, 5 for Instagram, and 1 for YouTube. Some young people reported spending more than 4 hours a day on Instagram (4 responses), TikTok (1 response), and YouTube (1 response), making this the third most common category of daily media use. These findings highlight that prolonged use of social media emphasizes the need to develop the skills necessary to critically interpret and assess the content.

The MENRE survey also asked young people to estimate the amount of time they spend specifically watching crisis-related content on social media. Five respondents reported spending approximately 1–2 hours per day, while another five indicated that they had never considered how much time they spend on this type of content, highlighting a low level of awareness regarding media use in the context of crisis content. An equal number of respondents estimated that they spend around 30 minutes to 1 hour per day watching crisis-related content on social media.

According to Nigratschka (2025), one reason for the increasing amount of time adolescents spend on social media is the presence of algorithms that provide highly personalized content. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok use advanced algorithms to match users' interests, motivating endless scrolling. Like a slot machine, these algorithms sometimes show contradictory content to spark curiosity, leading users to "fall down a rabbit hole" of single-topic content that becomes hard to escape.

These findings closely align with the results of the MENRE survey. The most frequently selected reason for watching crisis-related content on social media was "Because it is shared frequently in my feed" (6 responses), indicating a strong influence of social media algorithms on exposure to such content. The second most common responses were "To stay informed about what is happening in the world" and "Because it touches me emotionally" (5 responses each). The third most frequent responses, each with 4 answers, were "Because it affects my own life or future" and "To feel connected to others who are affected."

According to the MENRE project surveys completed by young people, the most frequently viewed topics on social media were personal crisis stories (e.g., illness, trauma, loss) and wars and armed conflicts (e.g., Russia-Ukraine, Middle East), each receiving 9 responses. These were followed by migration and refugee situations (8 responses). The third most common crisis-related content included mental health-related issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, ADHD) and violent acts (e.g., accidents, street robbery, violent protests, riots, deaths), each with 7 responses.

For the question, "What are the crises that concern you most?", we aimed to identify which of the observed crises worry young people the most. Seven respondents indicated personal crisis stories (e.g., illness, trauma, loss) and wars and armed conflicts (e.g., Russia-Ukraine, Middle East) as their primary concerns. The second most concerning topic was mental health-related issues (e.g., depression, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, ADHD), with 6

responses. The third most concerning crisis was the climate crisis (e.g., drought, record temperatures, heat waves, floods, severe storms, forest fires, melting polar ice). The least-mentioned topics were natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, pandemics) and animal cruelty, each with one response, while pandemics received no responses.

3.1 Personal Crises

3.1.1 Traumatic Experiences

An experience can become traumatic when the situation exceeds an individual's ability to cope, leaving them feeling overwhelmed. This often results in intense emotional stress, accompanied by feelings of helplessness, fear, and horror. In today's digital age, media literacy and the potential for trauma through digital media are increasingly important. Children and adolescents are exposed to a wide range of content and social interactions that may have potentially traumatic effects. On social media, there are hundreds of accounts dedicated to the topic of trauma, featuring bright colours, cute animals, and affirmations. Many users process their personal experiences through content creation such as memes and written posts. They share and distribute these materials as a way of coping with their own experiences. Consequently, social media often features representations of personal struggles, including managing one’s 'inner child,' establishing personal boundaries, and coping with the death of loved ones or experiences of sexual violence (Sittenauer 2025).

Sharing crisis- or trauma-related stories is known as “trauma dumping”. The term refers to the unfiltered and often unsolicited sharing of intense, personal, and distressing experiences, particularly trauma-related stories, in public or semi-public spaces such as social media. This practice can be emotionally overwhelming for others, potentially triggering those with similar experiences, and often disregards personal boundaries and mutual consent. On social media, this can involve posting graphic or emotionally charged content without warnings, leaving viewers unprepared and emotionally affected, which may lead to both positive and negative impacts.

It is important to note that there may be overlapping content, as personal accounts of traumatic experiences are often interconnected with broader crisis-related themes such as migration, war, or discrimination.

3.1.2 Mental health Issues

According to Sittenauer (2025), the full spectrum of contemporary mental health and awareness vocabulary can be found in this genre on social media. However, the widespread use of terms like “trauma”, the individualized focus on self-care, and the retreat into the private sphere raise concerns. In addition, the commercialisation and monetisation of online content, through newsletters and merchandise, make these sugar-coated communities problematic. On one hand, they curate the content that algorithms feed into timelines under the guise of mental health, neurodiversity, and general well-being. This often includes symptom descriptions that encourage self-diagnosis of ADHD or autism, or traumatic videos from strangers that leave viewers feeling disturbed and unsettled.

The book “Social Media as a Platform for Mental Health: Representations and Topics” (Altendorfer 2025) illustrates how mental health is frequently discussed and portrayed on social media. A key characteristic is the sharing of personal experiences and mutual support within communities. Platforms often function like digital self-help groups, where users share their mental health journeys and receive encouragement. Peer advice and self-help tips are also widespread. Many content creators use platforms like TikTok and Instagram for educational and awareness-raising purposes. In the context of mental health activism, the focus is on mobilization and highlighting social issues, while depression memes or trends like #stupidmentalhealthwalk often address mental illness through humour.

The Psychotherapeutic Centre Hamburg[2] points out that in recent years, the presence of psychological topics on social media has grown rapidly. These platforms offer visibility for mental health issues. Social media has made topics like depression, anxiety, and self-worth much more accessible and visible. As a result, more people are finding the courage to speak openly about their experiences, which can help reduce stigma and promote awareness and normalization of mental health. However, this development also comes with an increased risk of misinformation and harmful trends. Not all content visible on social media is reliable. “Self-diagnoses” or non-evidence-based advice can spread quickly, potentially leading to negative consequences. Therefore, professional guidance remains essential even by growing presence of this topic on social media. The centre points out an additional effect: content

[2]The interview is available on the website of the Psychotherapy Centre Hamburg: https://psychotherapie-zentrum-hamburg.de/2025/05/13/psychologie-in-den-sozialen-medien-zwischen-aufklaerung-und-risiko/ accessed 01.09.2025.

focusing on mental health issues can increase the pressure on users to present a perfect image of themselves. Constant exposure to idealized lifestyles often leads to dissatisfaction and self-doubt, especially among adolescents. Instead of providing inspiration, it can create the feeling of not being good enough.

In the context of crisis content presented on social media, special attention must be paid to young people with internalizing mental disorders such as depression or anxiety. Arand (2025) interviewed Anne Kaman from the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf (UKE) to contextualize the findings of a recent study from the UK. According to this British study, social media has a particularly strong impact on adolescents with internalizing mental disorders such as depression or anxiety. Young people affected by these conditions reported more often that they compare themselves with others on social media, that they struggle to control the amount of time they spend on the platforms, and that their mood changes depending on the likes and comments they receive. Kaman explains:

> The study shows that adolescents with already experiencing psychological strain are more susceptible to the negative effects of social media, for example through increased social comparison or emotional reactions to online feedback. These mechanisms can intensify existing symptoms such as low self-esteem or tendencies toward withdrawal. Unreflective or excessive social media use can therefore contribute to a deterioration in psychological well-being.

The MDR radio report *"ADHD and Social Media – Why We Think We Are Affected"* highlights how mental health-related content fuels trends and influences adolescents' self-perception in Germany. The growing presence of topics such as ADHD on social media may be contributing to a trend in which adolescents and young adults in Germany increasingly seek psychological services based on self-diagnosed ADHD. This represents a new development, as research shows that symptoms of ADHD typically appear before the age of seven (MDR Kultur 2024)[3].

[3] The interview is available on the website of MDR Kultur: https://www.mdr.de/wissen/medizin-gesundheit/audio-adhs-bei-jungen-erwachsenen-100.html accessed 01.09.2025.

3.2 Social Crises

3.2.1 Economic Crises

The “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (Calmbach et al. 2024) explores the political concerns of young people. Unsurprisingly, the respondents often refer to topics currently prominent in the media, although these do not necessarily reflect their personal sense of being affected (2024: 156). Although young people frequently mention the recent price increases, the prominence of this topic appears to be influenced more by constant media coverage than by their own direct experience. The price of items like döner kebabs is often used by young people as a relatable, everyday indicator of inflation. Some report having to adjust their spending habits. The uncertain future of rising prices causes concern and anxiety among adolescents, particularly the fear that certain segments of the population may no longer be able to afford basic food items. (ibid.: 163-164).

Many adolescents obtain information on topics such as “financial crises” and “financial literacy” through social media. However, while social media offer quick access to information, they also present challenges and risks. One of the greatest dangers is the spread of misinformation, which is amplified by the fast-paced and largely unregulated nature of social media. Additionally, the overvaluation of trending topics, such as “economic crises” and “investment trends”, can lead to risky financial decisions, especially when these are followed without proper analysis or understanding of the underlying risks[4]. This underlines the crucial importance of media literacy, which equips young people with the skills to critically evaluate digital content and make informed decisions, rather than relying solely on content in social media.

3.2.2 Refugee and Migration Crises

There is still little research in the academic literature on how social media portrays crises such as migration or refugee crises and how this affects the perceptions of young people. In the context of migration, media contributions are often discussed in general terms without addressing or incorporating individual user reports.

[4] The article is available: https://www.ak-kurier.de/akkurier/www/artikel/141432-finanzwissen-im-digitalzeitalter--die-rolle-sozialer-medien accessed 01.09.2025.

A working paper, “Silent Migrants, Loud Politics, Divided Media” published five years after the 2015 “refugee crisis,” examines how the media represented this event. Fengler and Kreutler (2020) explore whether the media reflected social reality accurately, fulfilled their duty to inform the public, and whether audiences in different countries such as Germany, Hungary, Spain, and Poland received similar information. This study provides important insights supported by an international research consortium, compares the reporting on refugees and migration in 16 European countries and the United States. The main conclusion is that there is no unified form of migration reporting, as significant content differences shape the media landscape in Europe.

According to the article “Public Opinion on Migration and the Role of the Media in the Context of the European Refugee Crisis” [5] by Koikkalainen et al. (2022), the public often overestimates the number of migrants and forms opinions based on what they assume to be the dominant type of migration. Media portrayals of migrants, whether as a burden or as a resource, can strongly shape public perceptions. The local context also plays a significant role, as the number of migrants living in different regions and cities varies considerably. According to Koikkalainen et al. (2022), providing accurate statistical information, emphasizing the diversity of current migration patterns, and participating in public discussions are ways to influence attitudes at the local level.

According to the “SINUS-Jugendstudie 2024” (Calmbach et al. 2024: 165), the Ukrainian population is met with deep empathy and compassion, especially among more education-oriented adolescents, who tend to express this more frequently. Many young people vividly imagine the situation of refugees or those still living in the war zone, expressing strong sympathy for those who have lost loved ones, their homes, or their entire livelihoods. At the same time, there is a sense of relief about not being directly affected by the war. Some acknowledge that it is difficult to fully grasp the reality of what Ukrainians are experiencing. An exception to this are young people who have experienced displacement themselves or whose families have passed down memories of recent wars. For this group, perceptions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are closely tied to personal or familial experiences. Some adolescents observe that the initial wave of empathy and support in Germany has gradually faded. They feel that public solidarity and material assistance from civil society are no longer,

[5] Die öffentliche Meinung über Migration und die Rolle der Medien im Kontext der „Europäischen Flüchtlingskrise“ (in Ger.)

or were never, sufficient. Exposure to social media content about the Ukrainian refugee crisis has intensified the perception of the war among young people in Germany.

3.2.3 War

According to Calmbach et al. (2024: 164-165), Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has triggered strong emotional responses among adolescents, including fear, anxiety, deep empathy for Ukrainians, and a lack of understanding about the reasons behind the conflict. There are hardly any notable differences in these reactions based on gender, education level, or social background. The days following the outbreak of war were marked by shock, horror, panic, and grief. The geographic proximity of the conflict deeply unsettled by many young people. They expressed serious concern that the war might spread to Germany or other countries, potentially endangering their own lives. Many also feel anxious about the uncertainty surrounding the war's progression. Some respondents mentioned the spread of fake news as a risk, noting that it has become difficult to discern what is trustworthy. A few reflected critically on the fact that their initial fear had subsided over time, even though the war has not lost any of its senselessness or horror. There is widespread incomprehension about the war, as describe in the study. No one accepted war as a legitimate political tool. A common narrative among adolescents was that political leaders enter armed conflicts while innocent civilians suffer needlessly and senselessly as a result. Some young people were aware of the historical significance of the war and express the feeling that they are witnessing "history in real time."

Kira Thiel is a Researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Media Research at Hans-Bredow-Institut (HBI). In an interview with Leibniz Magazin (2024), she explains that young people encounter much more explicit war content on social media than through traditional journalism. News and images of the conflict in the Middle East are ubiquitous, especially on Instagram and TikTok, often without adult supervision. Social media presents a mix of content from diverse sources: journalistic reports, clips from affected people, influencers' solidarity posts, and videos from combatants, such as Hamas recordings with bodycams. Thiel conducted direct discussions with adolescents about their experiences, focusing on how often they encounter war content and its role in their media routines. They reported seeing images of injured children, hostage situations, and the destruction in Gaza. Many are aware that prolonged viewing signals interest to algorithms, so they often skip videos before they end. However,

the short and abrupt nature of these videos makes it difficult to disengage. Notably, many adolescents spontaneously mentioned terms like “fake news” or “propaganda,” showing awareness of misinformation. They rely on source verification, although even trained journalists struggle in the “war of images and narratives.” Thiel emphasizes that it is not just the images themselves, but their emotional impact that matters; some visuals leave lasting impressions that “stick in the mind.”[6]

3.3 Global crises

3.3.1 Natural Disasters

Crisis-related content on natural disasters is widely shared on social media. Social media platforms are also consciously used as tools for crisis management. A study titled “Social Media in Crises and Disaster Situations”[7] [8]conducted by Schmidt from as early as 2015 already demonstrated how social media is used in strategic communication related to natural disasters. The mechanisms and functions of social media during crisis and disaster situations vary depending on the phase:

(a) before a crisis,

(b) during a crisis, and

(c) after a crisis.

This has led to a noticeable increase in the presence of governmental agencies, aid organizations, and other official actors on social media platforms. Before a crisis, and in special cases, social media can serve as an early warning system. During a natural disaster, those directly affected often become visible through social media, using the platforms to seek help, such as reliable information, relevant assessments, or advice. They may also report on the situation in real time. Various communicators and multipliers play a role in this context, including crisis teams, aid organizations, mass media, and individual users. After a crisis,

[6] The interview is available online: https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de/fileadmin/user_data/stiftung/02_Wissenschaftsportal/03_Publikationen/AP39_Migration.pdf accessed 16.11.2025.
[7] This source appears to be lecture notes from Ruhr University Bochum.
[8] The power point presentation is available https://www.kath.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/mam/notfallseelsorge/downloads/sozialemedien_schmidt_bochum_2015_print.pdf accessed 01.09.2025.

social media is often used to mobilize and coordinate support. Schmidt (ibid.) described the 'communicative architecture' of social media as problematic, as it facilitates the rapid spread of information from a wide range of sources, which can, in turn, exacerbate issues such as a lack of source transparency and information overload.

3.3.2 Climate Crisis

Content such as burning forests, raging floods, destructive storms, and paralyzing droughts exposes young people to the consequences of climate change on social media, even when they are not directly affected. Evidence from multiple studies indicates that youth are increasingly concerned about climate change (e.g. Kaman et al., 2025). According to the SINUS youth survey “Climate Anxiety” (BARMER 2024/2025), young people in particular experience climate anxiety. Several studies confirm that most adolescents are worried about climate change. The most recent SINUS survey (2024/2025) commissioned by BARMER shows that 33% of young people in Germany report experiencing high levels of fear regarding climate change (2023: 36%; 2022: 37%; 2021: 39%)[9].

The “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (2024: 159) shows that adolescents are certain climate change is caused by human activity. They express frustration that humanity continues to act in ways that threaten its own survival. Young people already perceive clear consequences, such as extreme temperatures and more frequent natural disasters with casualties. Moreover, adolescents are sensitized to the issue through media coverage and school education, which further amplifies their concerns and anxieties.

The IDZ Jena analysed social media posts on climate topics across Facebook, Instagram, and X, examining 262 accounts from various mass media and news outlets in the first half of 2024. Around 15,800 posts referenced the climate crisis or related issues. The study found that post volumes on climate topics have steadily declined since 2023 across all media categories, suggesting that climate coverage on social media is decreasing. This decline may

[9] The SINUS youth survey “Climate Anxiety” (BARMER 2024/2025) available at https://www.barmer.de/gesundheit-verstehen/mensch/gesundheit-2030/nachhaltigkeit/klima-angst-1072176 accessed 01.09.2025.

reflect a reduced public salience of climate issues, overshadowed by other events such as the European elections or conflicts in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine[10].

3.3.3 Terrorist Attacks

In the review of online materials, terrorist attacks (Reinemann et al. 2018, Langner 2023) are primarily discussed in the context of youth radicalisation and extremism. It is well known that young people encounter such content on social media. However, there is far less discussion about how exposure to terrorist attack content affects adolescents' general mental health or their confidence in the future. Likewise, it is rarely examined how young people perceive such content as a form of crisis.

Based on their susceptibility to terrorist content or messages, Reinemann et al. (2018) classify young people into four types: 'Uninformed,' 'Interested,' 'Reflective,' and 'At-risk. These groups differ significantly in their attitudes. Furthermore, the study emphasises that the susceptibility of young people to such content depends not only on their political knowledge but also on their level of media literacy.

4 Psychosocial Impacts on Young People

Kaman et al. (2025) examined how global crises increasingly affect the mental health of children and adolescents, noting that longitudinal research on this topic remains limited. The aim of their population-based longitudinal study was to investigate trajectories of youth mental health during periods of global crisis. The authors report that mental health among children and adolescents declined substantially at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, showed gradual improvement in subsequent years, but remained worse in autumn 2024 compared to pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, worries about war, economic instability, and the climate crisis increased. Risk factors such as low parental education and parental mental health problems were associated with poorer mental health outcomes, whereas personal, familial, and social resources demonstrated a protective effect.

[10] The study is available on the webpage of the Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft: https://www.idz-jena.de/forschung/digital-awareness accessed 01.09.2025.

4.1 Emotional responses

Emotions and emotional responses play a key role in the strategies behind platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Social media apps capitalize on the fact that people are generally driven by emotions. When something triggers an emotional reaction, whether positive or negative, we are more easily influenced to make decisions that may not be in our best interest. At the same time, emotional content can significantly increase user engagement (Nigratschka 2025).

Digital consumption and the constant stream of negative news can lead to what researchers describe as “chronic mental overload”. As a result, parts of the audience are turning away from the news due to symptoms of overload, experiencing so-called “news fatigue” and, in more extreme cases, “news burnout”, a state of total exhaustion caused by overly intense news consumption. Younger people, who frequently use social media, report feeling mentally drained and burned out by their media usage. Many describe feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and emotionally empty (Kramp and Weichert 2022).

On social media, young people are often unintentionally exposed to violent or disturbing content. This kind of exposure can lead to anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, especially if the content is not properly processed or addressed. They can trigger viewers feeling disturbed and unsettled. Crisis-related content on social media, when combined with extensive media use, can amplify emotional responses, for example, by increasing irritability and mood swings due to sleep deprivation. It may also contribute to emotional exhaustion, particularly as a result of late-night scrolling and prolonged exposure to emotionally intense or distressing material.

Adolescents already experiencing psychological strain are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social media. For example, increased social comparison or strong emotional reactions to online feedback can intensify existing issues such as low self-esteem or social withdrawal. Unreflective or excessive use of social media may therefore contribute to a further decline in psychological well-being (Arand 2025).

The “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (Calmbach et al. 2024: 170) shows that adolescents use a variety of coping strategies, for example in response to political crises. It was observed that some adolescents cope through avoidance or suppression, particularly boys. A central motive is self-protection against emotional overload, reported more frequently by adolescents with

higher levels of education. Occasionally, a fatalistic attitude emerges, such as the belief that political problems cannot be changed anyway. At the same time, some adolescents use the allowance and expression of emotions as a coping strategy, for example through crying or self-soothing, to process negative feelings and regain a sense of control.

Although reports of negative emotional reactions are more common, it is important to note that crisis-related content does not always elicit the same emotions, and responses depend on personal and social resources. According to Peter (2023: 28), adolescents display a diverse spectrum of emotional responses to socio-ecological crises, like the climate crisis. These can include negative feelings such as fear, anger, sadness, or frustration, as well as positive emotions like hope and a sense of belonging. The intensity and type of these emotional reactions are influenced by individual factors, including their understanding of the crisis, personal attitudes, perceived social support, and their emotional skills.

According to the “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (Calmbach et al. 2024: 158), political or social crises evoke strong emotional reactions in many young people, which can cause proactive actions. They often feel unsettled, worried, or overwhelmed, which frequently sparks a desire to channel this emotional unrest into concrete actions. These emotional impulses manifest not only as empathy or solidarity with those affected but also as a need to “do something” rather than remain passive. This emotional engagement often serves as the starting point for further responses.

Peter (2023: 28) points out that empirical evidence for the widespread occurrence of emotional reactions to socio-ecological crises exists primarily with regard to so-called “climate anxiety,” that is, concerns and fears related to the climate crisis and its consequences.

The SINUS youth survey “Climate Anxiety” (BARMER 2024/2025) highlights that climate anxiety is widespread among adolescents and should not be underestimated. However, it emphasizes that, for the vast majority, this anxiety does not constitute a mental disorder but is a natural reaction to a real threat. The survey also points out that this response can have

positive effects. At best, it does not lead to paralysis but instead motivates young people to engage with the threat of climate change and take action to counter it[11].

According to the MENRE survey results, when asked *"How does crisis-related content on social media affect you personally?"* most young people reported emotional reactions. The most frequently selected answer was "It makes me feel sad" (10 responses), followed by "It makes me feel overwhelmed" (8 responses) and "It makes me feel disappointed" (7 responses).

4.2 Cognitive effects

Crisis-related content on social media can have cognitive effects and influence information processing. For example, exposure to diverse personal narratives can enhance understanding and awareness of mental health issues or social challenges. It may also challenge existing beliefs and encourage more nuanced thinking about one's own experiences or those of others.

Perceiving crises as ever-present may alter how individuals process information and assess risks. Adolescents may develop a distorted worldview, where danger feels immediate and inescapable, even if they are not directly affected. This can lead to rumination, difficulty concentrating, or trouble distinguishing between real and perceived threats, potentially reinforcing negative thinking patterns.

Crisis-related content on social media, when coupled with extensive media use, can intensify cognitive impacts such as diminished concentration, reduced attention span, and impaired memory, particularly within academic or learning environments. These effects are often compounded by sleep deprivation, which further hinders decision-making and problem-solving abilities. Cognitive fatigue and disrupted circadian rhythms may ultimately contribute to lower academic performance.

Building on the emotional responses highlighted in the "SINUS-Jugendstudie" (2024: 158) above, cognitive effects become apparent: many adolescents reflect on their role in society

[11] The SINUS youth survey "Climate Anxiety" (BARMER 2024/2025) available at https://www.barmer.de/gesundheit-verstehen/mensch/gesundheit-2030/nachhaltigkeit/klima-angst-1072176 accessed 01.09.2025.

and the significance of global events. They critically engage with social issues, question power structures, and actively seek information about topics like climate change or social justice. This mental engagement can foster also a sense of responsibility and self-efficacy, even when their impact feels small.

4.3 Behavioural changes

The exposure to crisis-related content can also trigger behavioural changes. Triggered fears can lead to avoidance behaviours, such as withdrawing from news consumption altogether (called as “news fatigue") or obsessively seeking updates (called as “doomscrolling”).

Crisis-related content on social media, when combined with intensive media use, can prompt behavioural changes among youth. These include irregular sleep patterns, such as staying up late or waking during the night to check notifications and updates. Many adolescents report avoidance of responsibilities, including schoolwork or daily routines, due to fatigue or ongoing distraction. Compulsive checking and habitual scrolling, often continuing even when tired or already in bed, reflect a strong desire to remain informed, which may further disrupt healthy routines.

Normalization of interpersonal conflict and the promotion of sharing personal or social disputes online can lead adolescents to increasingly air private conflicts publicly via social media rather than resolving them in a private, face-to-face setting. Through this, they transition from passive consumers to active participants in how conflicts and crises are navigated digitally.

According to the “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (Calmbach et al., 2024: 158), fears about climate change, discrimination, or inflation often translate into observable actions. Adolescents show commitment through behaviours like biking, recycling, buying second-hand, sharing posts, or participating in discussions and demonstrations. Regarding discrimination, many intervene directly or inform adults. Crisis-related content on social media can foster connection and support, encouraging help-seeking, self-care, and proactive engagement.

In contrast to the findings of “SINUS-Jugendstudie”, the MENRE survey results show that crisis-related content rarely motivates young people to take action. In response to the question “How does crisis-related content on social media affect you personally?” only one

participant selected the option “It motivates me to take action or get involved.” Among the young people who completed the survey, there is therefore no observable indication that watching crisis-related content encourages positive engagement or proactive behavior. These findings may indicate that although crisis-related content affects young people emotionally, this sense of concern does not translate into active engagement or participation. This may also carries important implications for pedagogical and media education practice: professionals should recognize that mere exposure to crisis information does not automatically lead to empowerment or activation. Instead, supportive frameworks, such as opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and contextualization, are needed to foster action-oriented perspectives.

The “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (2024: 178) describes, adolescents also use active distraction to cope with such content, replacing negative thoughts with positive ones through physical activity, music, hobbies, or avoiding news. Ignoring political crises is also often linked to a general disinterest in politics or the belief that such issues do not directly affect them.

The MENRE survey also asked young people: “When you feel stressed, anxious, or overwhelmed because of crisis-related content on social media (e.g., about war, climate change, or inflation), what do you do to calm yourself or feel better?” The most frequently selected response was “I watch movies, TV shows, or series” (4 responses). The second most common answer was “I listen to music” (3 responses). The options “I take care of myself (e.g., resting, eating well),” “I talk to someone or ask for help,” and “I try to find something funny (e.g., memes or videos)” were each selected twice. According to these responses, with the exception of “I talk to someone or ask for help,” young people tend to prefer distracting themselves. They primarily use distraction-oriented coping mechanisms, such as watching (more) videos or listening to music. This suggests that many adolescents regulate their emotions by temporarily distancing themselves from stressful or sad content rather than confronting or processing it directly. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that young people do not automatically turn to supportive networks (such as friends, family, or professionals) when they feel overwhelmed. In the survey, only one respondent indicated “I spend time with friends or family” as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, or feelings of overwhelm caused by crisis-related content on social media. Many young people rely instead on short-term relief strategies that provide momentary stress reduction but do not necessarily contribute to long-term resilience. This points to the need for stronger media literacy,

emotional regulation training, and supportive spaces where crisis-related content can be discussed and contextualized.

4.4 Social impacts

Socially, fears related to crisis content on social media may drive withdrawal from peer interactions or increase online engagement over in-person connections. Crisis-related content on social media, when coupled with extensive media use, can foster social consequences such as withdrawal from offline relationships, particularly as nighttime engagement with social media displaces face-to-face interactions. It may also disrupt established family or peer routines, such as avoiding shared meals or meaningful conversations, and lead to an increased dependence on digital validation, which can gradually erode the value of real-life social support systems.

According to the “SINUS-Jugendstudie” (2024: 158), social effects can also emerge through their actions, young people influence their surroundings, they spark conversations, raise awareness of issues, and motivate peers to get involved. Their engagement contributes to making social problems more visible and strengthens a shared sense of responsibility. Conversely, fear and concern can also mobilize solidarity, as previously discussed, prompting young people to engage in activism or participate in online awareness campaigns. However, such engagement is not always sustainable and may, in some cases, intensify feelings of social division or contribute to emotional burnout. Sharing crisis-related content can contribute to the formation of peer-based support networks and online communities. They foster a sense of belonging and collective identity, which can empower marginalized voices and strengthen social bonds.

5 Youth Workers’ Perceptions of Crisis Content on Social Media and Its Impact on Young People

The topic of the MENRE project was considered highly important by the youth workers, as digital spaces occupy a significant part of young people’s lifeworlds and now take over many

functions, such as identity formation, that were previously fulfilled by family or parents. One youth worker described it as follows:

> A very important topic. It is alarming how digital media continue to develop. When I think back to my own youth, we used to go outside and spend time with friends and family. Today, many young people live in their own digital bubble, with very little exchange among each other.

Regarding the changing psychosocial development of young people over time, the interviewed youth workers agreed that adolescents today have fewer social contacts and, consequently, fewer social skills. One youth social worker noted that, in her experience, many young people hardly spend any time outdoors and have very limited face-to-face interaction. This contributes to growing social isolation. With regard to their mental health, she noticed that many adolescents seem afraid of participating in real-world situations. They feel the need to check their phones constantly, even in moments where it serves no purpose and where mindful presence would actually be beneficial. According to another interviewee, the influence of social media on the psychosocial development of young people has increased significantly over time. The influence of social media continues to grow and has become the strongest point of reference for many adolescents, significantly shaping their mental well-being. She perceives children and teenagers as increasingly insecure, depressed, and burdened by conflicts, showing limited self-regulation and little imagination when it comes to coping with difficult situations.

Another youth worker noted that young people watch a lot of nonsensical videos, some of which fall under crisis-related content. He observed that the main issue is that they are not yet able to reflect on what they watch. They also become desensitized quickly, and their empathy as a social competence is lacking.

> Young people are actually online far too much, and I think that watching all this stuff – violent videos or content showing young people wanting to harm themselves – definitely affects their psyche. They are often not accompanied or guided. The young people I work with do not have parents who would ask: What are you watching? Why are you watching this? They watch a lot of nonsense from others, and I feel that this also diminishes their empathy. They become desensitized.

Regarding the connection between young people's consumption of crisis-related content on social media and their social and emotional well-being, the interviewed youth workers reported that many adolescents are continuously exposed to such content, which can trigger fear and worry and significantly affect their emotional state. There is a high level of uncertainty about the future, and many young people often appear distracted or absent.

Another interviewee explained that social media simplifies opinion formation by offering quick answers to complex questions, which can create a temporary sense of reassurance. At the same time, adolescents become increasingly aware of the complexity and plurality of the world. Endless scrolling through the "For You" page was described as a troubling everyday phenomenon.

One youth worker emphasized that, in her view, the psychosocial impact of consuming crisis-related content strongly depends on the personality structure of each adolescent. Many do not question what they see on social media or rarely discuss it with others. Their susceptibility to being influenced also varies from person to person. In addition, they carry learned behavioral patterns from their family environment.

The interview guide also asked youth workers about their experiences with the types of crisis-related content young people consume on social media and whether adolescents have ever shared or discussed such content with them. One youth worker listed several types of crisis-related content that young people consume, including war, suicidality, self-harm, substance abuse, allegedly political topics, crimes committed by foreigners, all forms of racism, ableism, antisemitism, and sexism, women as targets, sexual assault fantasies, violent fantasies, and climate-related disasters. The interviews indicate that youth workers think young people rarely discuss such content with others, leaving them to deal with it on their own.

Some youth workers reported that young people have talked to them about crisis-related content. For example, one said that they had conversations about to the Ukraine war or the pension crisis, as well as regional issues, such as the "Fabian" case. Sometimes young people also tell her about disturbing videos they have seen on TikTok. However, young people rarely discuss the crisis-related content they encounter. Most keep it to themselves and remain isolated with their feelings. According to the youth worker, the majority of adolescents do not discuss these topics with their families, which means they lack protection and emotional support by dealing with these content.

The question “What social or emotional problems do you observe in adolescents in relation to crisis-related content on social media?” was answered consistently by the youth workers. They reported that young people often appear depressed, frustrated, and helpless, frequently feeling overwhelmed because they do not know how to cope with certain content. They lack answers, as they do not yet have the necessary knowledge. Many experience fear about the future, fear of other people, fear of rejection, fear of illness, fear of not being recognized, and fear of deportation. One youth worker stated: “I see that they are constantly confronted with such content, which often triggers feelings of helplessness. This, in turn, reinforces pessimistic views of the future.”

In the interviews, youth workers were explicitly asked which coping strategies they would recommend to adolescents experiencing stress or anxiety as a result of crisis-related content on social media. The responses were largely consistent. Key recommendations included the development of media literacy, engagement in reflective personal discussions, and the critical evaluation of information sources.

One youth worker emphasized the necessity of a multifaceted approach that combines the strengthening of media literacy, facilitated personal conversations, and participation in creative activities. Recommended measures included intentional digital detoxes, scheduled breaks, and, where appropriate, a temporary shift to analog news consumption to moderate the speed of information intake and promote conscious engagement with content. Equally important were discussions with trusted adults, such as school social workers, youth workers, or family members. Additionally, the interviewee highlighted the importance of cultivating awareness of misinformation and fake news.

An additional recommendation was to seek allies or supportive peers in order to recognize that one is not alone in dealing with distressing thoughts or problems.

Regarding explicit strategies to interrupt or better manage exposure to consistently negative content, they responded that questioning and critically reflecting on what one sees is a very effective strategy. However, many young people assume that the content they encounter is real. According to them, social media does not always present information accurately, and it contains a significant amount of misinformation, including AI-generated fake videos. The development of these technologies is happening so quickly that it is difficult to keep pace. They expressed concern that professionals are often no longer able to equip young people with appropriate strategies or protect them adequately, due to a lack of the necessary

knowledge. Additionally, strategies such as limiting content on devices, discussing the content, deleting apps, and setting regulated usage times were also mentioned.

At the conclusion of the interviews, youth workers highlighted several positive effects of crisis-related content on social media. These included facilitating social interaction, rapid access to information, exposure to diverse perspectives, and motivating participation in demonstrations or charitable initiatives. They also noted that social media can feature constructive content, such as crowdfunding campaigns that encourage social responsibility. Such initiatives can foster young people's civic engagement and prosocial behavior. Additionally, crises can inspire creative challenges that address feelings of helplessness while promoting motivation and societal participation. However, one youth worker emphasized that these positive effects only arise if the viewed content is actively reflected upon.

6 Best practice educational offerings

The best-practice educational offerings presented here are derived from the broader discourse surrounding crisis-related content on social media. From this discourse, three types of educational offerings were identified as best practices, which also align with the recommendations provided by youth workers during the interviews conducted for this report.

1. Strengthening resilience to support young people in coping with crisis content presented on social media.

These educational offerings align particularly well with the goals of the MENRE project.

2. Strengthening media literacy in the context of disinformation
3. Creative approaches for engaging with crisis-related content

6.1 Strengthening resilience to support young people in coping with crisis content presented on social media

The JFF – Jugend Film Fernsehen e. V. from Münich has been dedicated to media-related issues, both theoretically and practically, since 1949. Its interdisciplinary research team

examines current media phenomena as well as the complex processes through which children and adolescents engage with media. The practice department develops innovative projects that encourage participants to work creatively with media and to learn how to use them confidently and autonomously.

In 2023, the JFF offered a five-day course “Emphasis on fostering resilience” focusing on children and adolescents aged 10 to 19. The training is practice-oriented and enables educational professionals in child and youth services to develop and expand their media education competencies through various online and offline formats. A central component of the course is the development and implementation of a media education practice project within participants’ own work environments. This includes reflecting on the media-pedagogical conditions of their respective institutions. Target group of the course were educational professionals in child and youth services in Bavaria who work with school-aged children and adolescents[12].

6.2 Strengthening media literacy in the context of disinformation

For adolescents, assessing the credibility of crisis related content is becoming increasingly difficult, even if they often feel confident in their ability to judge it. It is therefore essential that young people learn how to identify disinformation and distinguish editorial content from opinion-based posts. It is also helpful for them to understand that many posts are intentionally designed to attract clicks, trigger emotions and are often carefully staged. Building on this discourse, media education initiatives have developed offerings focused specifically on identifying and critically assessing disinformation.

In the field of fake news and disinformation, the online research identified a wide range of educational offerings. These are provided by both governmental and civil society actors. In addition, numerous materials have been developed to raise awareness of misinformation and to equip both professionals and young people with the skills needed to critically assess information and navigate the “information jungle.”

[12] Further information about the course *“*Emphasis on fostering resilience*”* can be found on the website of the JFF – Jugend Film Fernsehen e. V. Available online https://www.medien-weiter-bildung.de/blended-learning-resilienz-2023/ accessed 18.10.2025.

Germany also participates in “Safer Internet Day”, an awareness initiative launched in 1999 as part of the European Commission’s “Safer Internet Programme”. As part of the activities coordinated by klicksafe, numerous annual events and educational programmes are offered that focus on disinformation and digital literacy.

A concrete example of an educational offer in the field of fake news and disinformation is provided by the Servicestelle Kinder- und Jugendschutz of fjp>media, the association of young media creators in Saxony-Anhalt. The project “Fake News - Tracking Down False Information” includes a three-hour workshop that can be conducted both online and in person. It equips young people with methods and tools that support a critical approach to media content. Participants learn about different forms and causes of disinformation and, based on their own experiences and examples, develop and discuss possible strategies for dealing with it. In a hands-on section, they discover how easily content can be manipulated by producing their own “fake news”, thereby understanding the urgent need for strong information literacy. The workshop focuses on disinformation and media manipulation, the political dimensions of fake news, and the use of digital and analogue tools[13].

6.3 Creative approaches for engaging with crisis-related content

Social media platforms provide diverse opportunities for young people to articulate emotions and engage in interpersonal exchange. During periods of crisis, expressions of solidarity are particularly visible across these channels. Platforms such as TikTok enable users to respond to and creatively reinterpret the content of others, offering a productive avenue for demonstrating empathy and communal support. When children and adolescents can express solidarity, take positions, and participate actively in online discourse, they experience a form of self-efficacy that may be less accessible in their offline environments.

Building on this, the desk research identified RISE – “Youth Perspectives Against Extremism” (JFF) as a promising initiative that could be adapted to address crisis-related content. RISE is a media education project developed by the JFF (Jugend Film Fernsehen e. V.) that supports young people in producing their own media artefacts (e.g., films, videos) and in

[13] Further information about the project “Fake News – Tracking Down False Information” can be found on the website of the Servicestelle Kinder- und Jugendschutz. Available online: https://www.servicestelle-jugendschutz.de/bildungsangebote/projekt-fake-news/ accessed 18.10.2025.

critically reflecting on extremist or socio-political content. Although the project does not directly address crisis-related content on social media, its structure and pedagogical materials render it suitable for adaptation. The accompanying resources provide educators and youth workers with methodological guidance for facilitating discussions and fostering critical thinking about radical or sensitive content online[14].

7 Conclusion

7.1 Key Findings of the Report

Key findings of the desk research

The rising psychological distress among many people in Germany can in part be attributed to social media making recent crises in everyday life feel highly present. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis are more immediately tangible than previous emergencies. Ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East, economic instability, and the intensifying climate crisis further undermine mental well-being, potentially contributing to heightened anxiety, frustration, hopelessness, and depressive symptoms.

A wide array of crisis-related content is available online, including material concerning trauma, mental health, war, terrorism, climate change, and natural disasters. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable in socio-ecological crises due to their limited coping resources and dependence on adults and institutions, which may exacerbate negative outcomes.

The increasing time adolescents spend on social media is partly driven by algorithms that deliver highly personalized content. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok encourage prolonged engagement through tailored recommendations, often exposing users to unfiltered and unsolicited accounts of intense, distressing experiences. Such content can be emotionally overwhelming, potentially triggering individuals with similar experiences, and often disregards personal boundaries and informed consent. Posting graphic or emotionally charged material without warnings leaves viewers unprepared and may have both positive

[14]Further information about the project RISE can be found on the project website. Available online https://rise-jugendkultur.de/files/2022/08/rise_we-are-youth-perspectives-against-extremism-brochure.pdf accessed 18.11.2025.

and negative psychological effects. The strong media coverage of certain content can also influence young people, making them feel impacted by the crises they encounter on social media.

Crisis content on social media serves multiple functions: it informs, elicits emotional responses, and motivates action. Given the current information overload, it is imperative that young people develop strategies for managing content and information, alongside regulated media use, to mitigate the potentially overwhelming effects of social media engagement.

Key findings field research

To complement the desk research, empirical data through surveys and interviews were also collected. The survey results showed that some young people estimate spending more than four hours per day on social media, including up to 1.5 hours watching crisis-related content. This kind of content makes them feel sad and worried about their future.

The interviews revealed that many young people are exposed to a constant stream of such content, which can trigger anxiety and worry and strongly affect their emotional well-being. There is significant uncertainty about the future, and many adolescents often appear distracted or absent. As coping strategies, youth workers recommended that young people deliberately seek out news from reliable sources instead of continuously consuming random content. They emphasized the importance of making access to information more intentional. Conversations with trusted individuals, whether school social workers, youth workers, or family members, were highlighted as equally important, as well as raising awareness about fake news. Recommended strategies include taking conscious digital breaks, scheduling pauses or “detox” periods, actively filtering content, and establishing fixed screen times to reduce constant consumption and regain focus on real-life experiences. Overall, the interviews suggest that a combination of strengthened media literacy, personal dialogue, and creative activities is needed to strengthen young people to deal with crisis-related content on social media.

7.2 Critical Reflections on the Report

Critical reflection of the desk research

Current research on the psychological effects of crisis-related content on social media has primarily focused on short-term mental and emotional outcomes in adolescents. Long-term effects, such as the development of various coping skills, resilience, and the formation of a stable worldview, remain insufficiently investigated due to the lack of longitudinal studies. Furthermore, numerous studies have identified associations between social media use, exposure to crisis-related content, and psychological distress, although establishing causal relationships remains challenging. It is conceivable that adolescents who are already experiencing psychological strain are more likely to engage with social media, and that the content alone does not fully account for the observed distress, particularly given the difficulty of distinguishing crisis-related content from other material on social media.

Interventions commonly proposed in the literature, such as implementing stricter limits on media use or developing individualized content-management strategies, tend to emphasize personal responsibility. However, these approaches often overlook structural and societal factors that influence media use and mental health. Effective strategies should therefore also consider systemic factors, including the enhancement and dissemination of media literacy programs and the expansion of institutional support services. The combination of individual-level and structural interventions is essential to mitigate the potentially adverse effects of crisis-related content on social media and to promote the long-term psychological well-being of adolescents.

Critical reflection of the field research

The surveys and interviews provide meaningful exploratory insights into how young people experience crisis-related content on social media. However, several methodological limitations, most notably the small sample size, the reliance on self-reported data, and the limited diversity of perspectives, require cautious interpretation. The survey included only 15 young participants, and four interviews were conducted with youth workers. While these data offer valuable indications, the small sample limits the generalizability of the findings, which should therefore be viewed as exploratory rather than representative of the broader youth population.

Furthermore, the information collected on social media usage and exposure to crisis-related content is based entirely on self-reporting. Adolescents often under- or overestimate their

screen time, and without objective usage data, the accuracy of these estimates remains uncertain. Social desirability bias may also have shaped the way participants described their coping strategies.

The interview data should be interpreted with similar caution. Since the interviews were conducted exclusively with youth workers, the insights represent professional interpretations of young people's experiences rather than the youths' own accounts. Although these perspectives provide valuable contextual understanding, they are filtered through adults' perceptions. Interviews with adolescents themselves could have complemented, nuanced, or challenged these viewpoints.

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