

# **BETWEEN SCREENS AND INFLUENCE: WHO SHAPES THE ONLINE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG PEOPLE?**

*Attitudes of young people in Bosnia and  
Herzegovina towards influencers and their  
content*

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**DRAFT REPORT**  
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## Executive Summary

Influencers have become an integral part of everyday life for young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Young people follow them daily, often for several hours a day, primarily through TikTok and Instagram. Their content is not only a source of entertainment: it also influences attitudes, habits, consumer decisions, self-confidence, and the way young people perceive themselves and the world around them. This research shows that such influence is neither uniform nor harmless, but it is also not accepted uncritically by young people.

### **Young people are not passive, but they are constantly exposed**

The findings show that young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not perceive influencers as absolute authorities. Trust in the information shared by influencers is generally partial and selective. Nevertheless, nearly half of young people report that the opinions of influencers hold some importance for them, while more than one quarter say they have changed a behavior or attitude because of influencer content ranging from lifestyle and consumption choices to attitudes toward their own bodies and mental health.

The risk does not arise from a single post or a single influencer, but from **repetition, emotional closeness, and constant presence**. The more time young people spend engaging with influencer content, the greater the likelihood that the messages will become normalized and translate into real-life decisions.

### **When an advertisement looks like advice**

The research clearly shows that young people recognize the strong commercial dimension of influencer content, yet they also report that sponsored posts are not always clearly or consistently labeled. Particularly within lifestyle and beauty content, promotions are often presented as personal experiences or recommendations, making it difficult for young people to distinguish advertising from genuine opinion.

This has real consequences where some young people, especially girls, report purchasing products based on influencer recommendations and generally being satisfied with these purchases. In this way, influencers become not only cultural actors but also economic actors in the lives of young people, often without clear rules regarding transparency and accountability.

### **The digital space as a source of pressure, not only entertainment**

Young people regularly encounter content they perceive as harmful or risky: unrealistic standards of beauty and success, promotion of alcohol and other risky behaviors, sexualized content, hate speech, and extreme ideas. Nearly one in four young people report that they have felt bad at least once after watching influencer content.

These experiences are not the same for everyone. Girls more often report negative effects on self-confidence and pressure to look or live “perfectly.” Boys more frequently express concern about the normalization of violence, risky behaviors, and manipulation of information. Older adolescents are more likely to recognize risks, yet they also express greater skepticism about whether existing protection systems can effectively protect them.

### **The gap between protection "on paper" and real experience**

Although most young people know that mechanisms exist to report harmful content, reporting remains rare in practice. Young people often perceive reporting procedures as unclear, platform responses as slow or invisible, and believe that reporting "does not change anything." This gap between formal protection mechanisms and the actual feeling of safety contributes to the silent normalization of harmful content instead of its systemic response.

### **Who young people see as responsible**

Young people most often attribute responsibility for influencer content to the influencers themselves and to digital platforms. Governments and parents are less frequently seen as primary actors of responsibility. At the same time, young people recognize that protection in the online space cannot be achieved through the actions of a single actor. Young people are not calling for internet censorship they are calling for clear rules, transparency, and knowledge that enables them to understand and critically assess the content they encounter.

### **What this means for action?**

The findings indicate that online safety for young people cannot rely solely on the individual responsibility of children and young people within a digital environment designed to capture attention, blur the boundaries between advertising and content, and reward extreme and emotionally charged messages.

The findings clearly point to the need for:

- strengthening media and digital literacy as a first line of protection
- clearer and more consistent rules for labeling sponsored content
- more visible, simpler, and more effective reporting mechanisms
- recognizing influencers as public actors with responsibilities, particularly toward minors
- coordinated action among parents, schools, platforms, regulators, and content creators.

### **Concluding message**

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not lost in the digital space, but they are often left to navigate its pressures on their own. This research shows that there is a strong foundation for building a safer, more transparent, and more responsible online environment. The key question is no longer whether influencers influence young people, but whether that influence will remain without clear rules, or be guided in ways that support the well-being, development, and rights of children and young people.

## Introduction: Influencers as part of the everyday digital environment of youth

Digital media today represent the central environment in which young people communicate, access information, and shape their attitudes. Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) shows that social media and online portals are the dominant sources of information for young people, while traditional media have a significantly smaller reach. As many as 65% of young people cite online portals as their primary source of news, while 28% report that they obtain most of their information through social media<sup>1</sup>. Similar patterns have been observed across European countries, where young people increasingly consuming news, attitudes and social topics through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube<sup>2</sup>. In such a digital environment, influencers position themselves as important mediators of information, norms and values. Their influence is not primarily based on formal expertise, but rather on the perception of authenticity, closeness, and continuous presence in the everyday online lives of young people. Young people often perceive influencers as “ordinary people” with whom they can develop parasocial relationships<sup>3</sup>, which increases openness to the messages influencers share and the likelihood that those messages will be accepted. While some influencers are viewed positively by young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (as creators of educational content or promoters of socially beneficial topics), others are criticized for promoting unrealistic, materialistic lifestyles without meaningful substance.

Although influencers can provide educational or inspiring content, experts warn about a range of risks and negative impacts associated with this phenomenon. Particular concern relates to the spread of misinformation and unreliable claims, as influencers often lack formal expertise but still provide advice on topics such as health, nutrition, or lifestyle that may be inaccurate or misleading. Another challenge lies in the strong commercial dimension of influencer content. Many content creators generate income through product promotion, sometimes uncritically advertising unhealthy foods, dietary supplements, or other potentially risky practices, often without clear and consistent labeling of sponsored content<sup>4</sup>. However, the impact of influencers extends beyond the promotion of individual products or trends. Their messages and representations can have a broader impact on how young people shape their self-image, aspirations, and perceptions of the world around them.

### The impact of influencer content on self-confidence and mental health

The time adolescents spend engaging with social media and influencer content does not only provide entertainment it can also influence their perception of themselves. Many influencers present idealized versions of themselves, including physical appearances enhanced with filters, luxurious lifestyles, and constant positivity. This can create unrealistic standards against which young people compare themselves. Research shows that nearly half of adolescents report that social media content negatively affects their perception of their own bodies<sup>5</sup>. Girls are particularly vulnerable in this regard,

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<sup>1</sup> Mediacentar Sarajevo. (2021). Youth for Better Media: The Attitudes, Habits and Needs of Youth in BiH Regarding Media Content. [https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi\\_za\\_bolje\\_medije\\_eng\\_03\\_final.pdf](https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi_za_bolje_medije_eng_03_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Smahel, D., Macháčková, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., and Hasebrink, U. (2020). EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries. <https://www.eukidsonline.ch/files/Eu-kids-online-2020-international-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> A parasocial relationship is a one-sided psychological relationship in which an individual develops a sense of closeness, familiarity, or emotional connection with a media person (e.g., actor, influencer, public figure), even though there is no actual interaction with each other

<sup>4</sup> Engel, E., Gell, S., Heiss, R., & Karsay, K. (2023). Social media ers and adolescents' health: A scoping review of the research field. *Social Science & Medicine*, 340(116387), 116387–116387. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116387>

<sup>5</sup> Bickham, D.S., Hunt, E., Bediou, B., & Rich, M. (2022). Adolescent Media Use: Attitudes, Effects, and Online Experiences <https://digitalwellnesslab.org/wp-content/uploads/Pulse-Survey-Adolescent-Attitudes-Effects-and-Experiences.pdf>

as they are more likely to internalize the idealized and unrealistic beauty standards they encounter online, which can lead to body dissatisfaction and negative moods. Younger girls and those with lower self-confidence are also more likely to compare themselves negatively with influencers who present highly attractive appearances<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, it is important to note that the influence of influencer content is not exclusively negative. Some influencers contribute to normalizing conversations about mental health, promote acceptance of diversity, or provide a sense of community and support, which some young people recognize as a positive resource. However, experts also warn about the risks associated with toxic content, such as posts promoting unhealthy weight loss, self-harm, or dangerous online challenges. According to recent research conducted in Europe, approximately 10–12% of children aged 11 to 16 have encountered online content that glorifies self-harm or extreme dieting<sup>7</sup>. Experts therefore emphasize the importance of digital literacy and emotional support: young people need to be empowered to take a critical look at what they see online and to understand that many "perfect" images are actually unrealistic.

#### Online child protection: reporting, the role of platforms and the regulatory framework

Protecting children in the online environment has become a priority for many regulators and digital platforms. Reporting mechanisms for harmful content exist across major social media platforms, yet young people use them relatively rarely. Research shows that as many as 71% of children have experienced some form of online harm (such as insults, harassment, or inappropriate content), but only 36% reported it to the platform<sup>8</sup>. The main reasons children cite include: an unclear and complex reporting process, skepticism because many people think that "reporting will not change anything", perception that platforms are slow to respond or not at all. In a similar vein, back in 2018, the Council of Europe issued comprehensive Guidelines on the Rights of the Child in the Digital Environment (CM/Rec(2018)7), calling on states to ensure that children have access to the internet in safe conditions, that platforms proactively prevent harm, that effective reporting and legal protection mechanisms adapted to children are in place. In line with these guidelines, many European countries have launched initiatives ranging from the introduction of digital education programmes in schools—teaching children how to respond to cyberbullying or grooming—to the establishment of specialized bodies dedicated to online child safety. A lack of trust in reporting systems may mean that the actual scale of harmful content is underestimated, reducing pressure on platforms to respond. As a result, regulators around the world are increasingly working to establish clearer rules.

At the level of European Union, the Digital Services Act (DSA), adopted in 2022, represents a significant step forward in the regulation of digital platforms, with a particular focus on protection of minors. The European Commission's new guidelines (2025)<sup>9</sup> detail measures for platforms including: ensuring that minors' accounts are private by default, excluding algorithmic recommendations of risky content for children, and providing simpler tools for blocking and reporting unwanted interactions. Particular emphasis is placed on transparency and speed of response, where platforms

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<sup>6</sup> Mahon, C. and Hevey, D. (2021). Processing Body Image on Social Media: Gender Differences in Adolescent Boys' and Girls' Agency and Active Coping. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.626763>

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament. (2025). Youth and social media [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/779235/EPRS\\_BRI\(2025\)779235\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/779235/EPRS_BRI(2025)779235_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Internet Matters. (2025). Understanding and improving how children report online harm. <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Understanding-and-improving-how-children-report-online-harm-Internet-Matters-May-2025.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> European Union. (2025). Guidelines on measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security for minors online [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:C\\_202505519](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=OJ:C_202505519)

must provide feedback on reports within a reasonable period of time and appeal decisions if they are dissatisfied with the outcome. Online child protection is therefore becoming a multidisciplinary effort, from technical solutions such as age verification systems, to awareness-raising and international regulatory standards, all with the shared goal of ensuring that the digital environment is a place where young people can learn, communicate, and grow without fear of exploitation or harm.

## Methodology

### Research objective

The objective of this research was to examine the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding influencers and the content they follow on social media. Particular attention was given to how young people interpret influencer messages, recognize potential risks, and reflect on issues of responsibility and protection in the online environment.

### Sample

The survey was conducted on a convenience sample of secondary school students across Bosnia and Herzegovina, including urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Although the sample is not statistically representative, the high number of participants and rapid response rate indicate strong interest among young people in sharing their experiences and views on this topic, as well as the relevance of influencer content in their everyday digital environment..

A total of **2,389 young people** from across Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the survey, including girls and boys from different age groups, with the largest share being **15 to 18 years old**<sup>10</sup>. 2,480 individuals accessed the online questionnaire, of whom 2,389 provided consent to participate and proceeded with completing the survey.

**Table A. Structure of male and female students by gender and age group**

Gender x Age Group						
Age group	Male		Female		I don't want to say	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>13-14</b>	1	<1%	4	<1%	1	1%
<b>15-16</b>	344	55%	852	51%	42	55%
<b>17-18</b>	254	40%	761	45%	30	40%
<b>19 or older</b>	30	5%	67	4%	3	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>629</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1684</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note: The detailed structure of the sample according to place of residence and administrative unit is shown in the [Annex \(Tables A1–A2\)](#).*

### Instrument and Questionnaire Content

An anonymous online questionnaire was used, which included a combination of closed and open questions. The questionnaire included topics related to the use of social networks, the types of influencer content that young people follow, trust in the information shared by influencers, changes in opinion or behaviors, perceptions of harmful or risky content, emotional reactions, experiences with reporting harmful content, and attitudes towards regulation and responsibility in the online

<sup>10</sup> Although the 13-14 age group is included in the descriptive presentation of the sample, it was excluded from further statistical analysis due to the small number of respondents (less than 1%).

environment. Open-ended questions enabled young people to describe in their own words the content they perceive as the most harmful and the ways in which they think about protection in the digital environment. **Note: A detailed overview of the questions and the structure of the questionnaire is presented in the [Annex](#).**

#### Ethics and Protection of Participants

The research was conducted in accordance with UNICEF's ethical standards. Participation in the survey was voluntary and based on informed consent, and the data collected did not include personally identifiable information. Particular attention is paid to the protection of the privacy and well-being of participants throughout the data collection process.

#### Data collection and analytical approach

The data collection was carried out in the period from **December 10 to December 25, 2025**. The online questionnaire was distributed in cooperation with the Network of Student Councils in BiH (mreSVUBiH), through student council structures in secondary schools across the country. This approach enabled a rapid and geographically diverse response from young people.

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, with comparisons of responses by gender and age group. Two age categories were used in the analysis: adolescents aged 14 to 16 and adolescents aged 17 to 19 years, while differences by gender were analyzed between girls and boys, with the aim of noticing patterns in experiences and perceptions of young people. **The findings of the research represent the perceptions and experiences of young people at a particular point in time and should be interpreted in the context of self-reported responses and a specific sample of respondents.**

## 1. Use of Social Media: Where do young people encounter influencers?

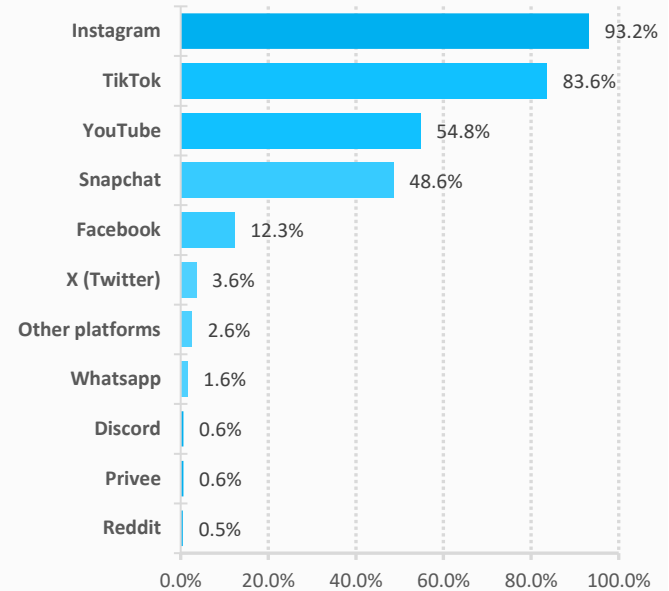
Social media form the everyday digital environment of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and represent the primary space where they encounter influencers and their content. To better understand how influencers shape young people's attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions, it is important to examine where young people are online, how much time they spend engaging with such content, and what types of content they most frequently follow.

### 1.1. Social media platforms used by young people

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina use multiple social media platforms simultaneously, with TikTok and Instagram standing out as the dominant spaces for following influencers, alongside noticeable differences in platform use by gender and age. Instagram use is high and consistently widespread among young people, regardless of gender or age, indicating its universal presence in adolescents' digital habits. TikTok and Snapchat, on the other hand, are used more frequently by girls<sup>11</sup>, while boys more often use YouTube, Facebook, and the platform X (Twitter).<sup>12</sup> Age differences further shape these patterns: younger adolescents (aged 14–16) more frequently use Snapchat, while older adolescents (aged 17–19+) more often use Facebook. At the same time, YouTube emerges as a platform with relatively equal usage across all age groups. These patterns may be linked to the types of content offered by different platforms, as well as to different stages of adolescence during which interests and digital habits evolve.

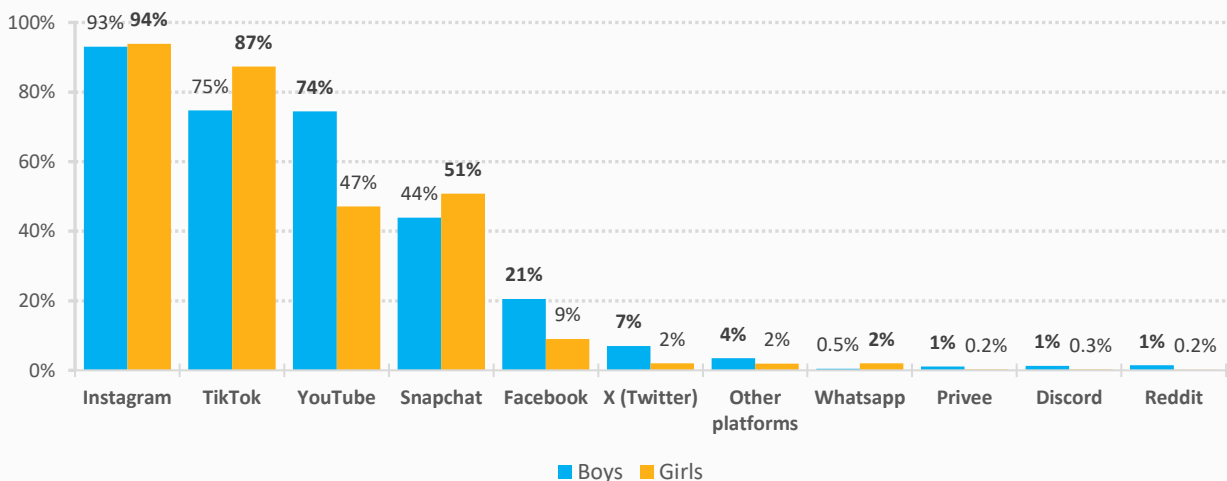
**Figure 1. Which social media platforms do you use most often?**

Share of respondents using specific social media platforms (% of total sample; multiple responses allowed)



**Figure 2. Differences in Social Media Use**

Share of respondents by gender and platform (%; multiple responses allowed)



Differences in platform choice, even at a basic level, create distinct online experiences, which may influence the types of influencer content young people encounter and how they perceive it.

<sup>11</sup> TikTok and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 53.40, p < .001$ ; Snapchat and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 9.08, p = .003$

<sup>12</sup> Youtube and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 137.02, p < .001$ ; Facebook and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 57.24, p < .001$ ; Twitter and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 36.04, p < .001$

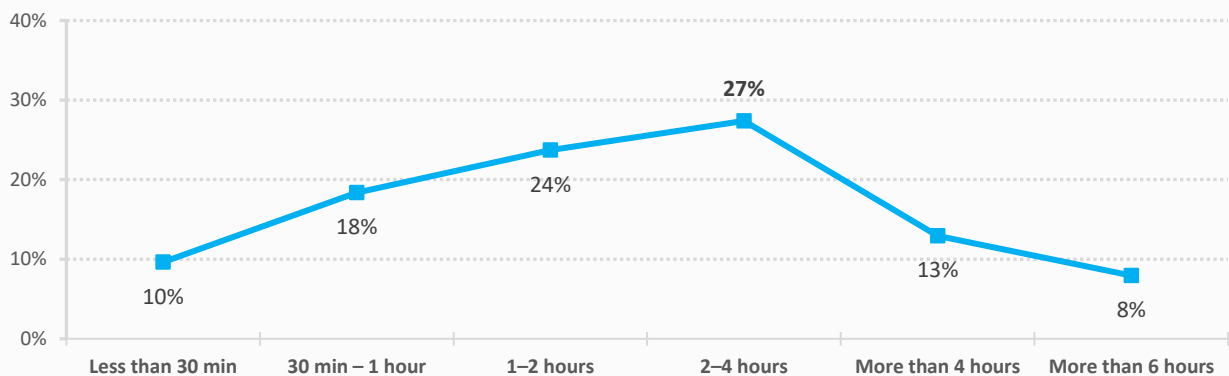
## 1.2. Time spent engaging with influencer content

**Most young people spend more than two hours daily following influencer content, with younger adolescents, on average, spending more time engaging with such content than older adolescents.**

The most commonly reported time range is 2–4 hours per day, indicating that influencer content represents a regular part of everyday online experiences for a significant proportion of young people. Age-related differences are also reflected in usage patterns, with younger adolescents spending more time following influencers than older adolescents<sup>13</sup>. This pattern may be related to the way younger adolescents use social media, as influencer content is more likely to take center stage in their daily online activities and interactions.

**Figure 3. How much time per day do you spend watching influencer content?**

Share of respondents by estimated daily viewing time (% of total sample)



Longer exposure to influencer content may increase the likelihood of message repetition, emotional identification with influencers, and the gradual normalization of certain behaviors<sup>14</sup>. For this reason, time spent engaging with such content represents an important context for understanding later findings related to trust, behavioral change, and risk perception.

## 1.3. Types of content followed by young people

**Patterns of engagement with influencer content vary by content type and reflect diverse interests among young people in the online space.**

The analysis shows that girls are significantly more likely to follow lifestyle (60%) and beauty content (69%),<sup>15</sup> while boys are more interested in gaming (59%) and humorous content (58%).<sup>16</sup> Differences were also observed in educational content, which is somewhat more common among boys (45%). Content preferences also vary by age. Younger adolescents more frequently follow gaming content<sup>17</sup>, while older ones are more likely to turn to educational<sup>18</sup> and fitness content<sup>19</sup>. In contrast, interest in lifestyle, beauty, reaction/commentary, and humorous content remains consistent across age groups, highlighting their broad and general popularity. These differences suggest that young people do not engage with influencer content in a uniform way, but rather in accordance with their individual interests, life stage, and preferences.

<sup>13</sup> Age groups and time spent watching influencers:  $F(2, 2124) = 3.14$ ;  $p < 0.05$

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia A. Hoffner, Bradley J. Bond. (2022). Parasocial relationships, social media, & well-being <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101306>

<sup>15</sup> Lifestyle and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 79.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Beauty and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 785.0$ ,  $p < .001$

<sup>16</sup> Gaming and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 449.6$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Comedy and gender (1) = 16.68,  $p < .001$

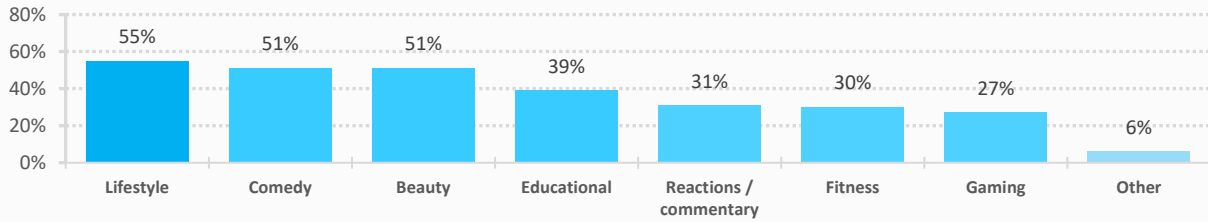
<sup>17</sup> Gaming and age group  $\chi^2(2) = 7.11$ ,  $p = .029$

<sup>18</sup> Educational content and age group  $\chi^2(2) = 19.12$ ,  $p < .001$

<sup>19</sup> Fitness content and age group  $\chi^2(2) = 8.47$ ,  $p = .014$

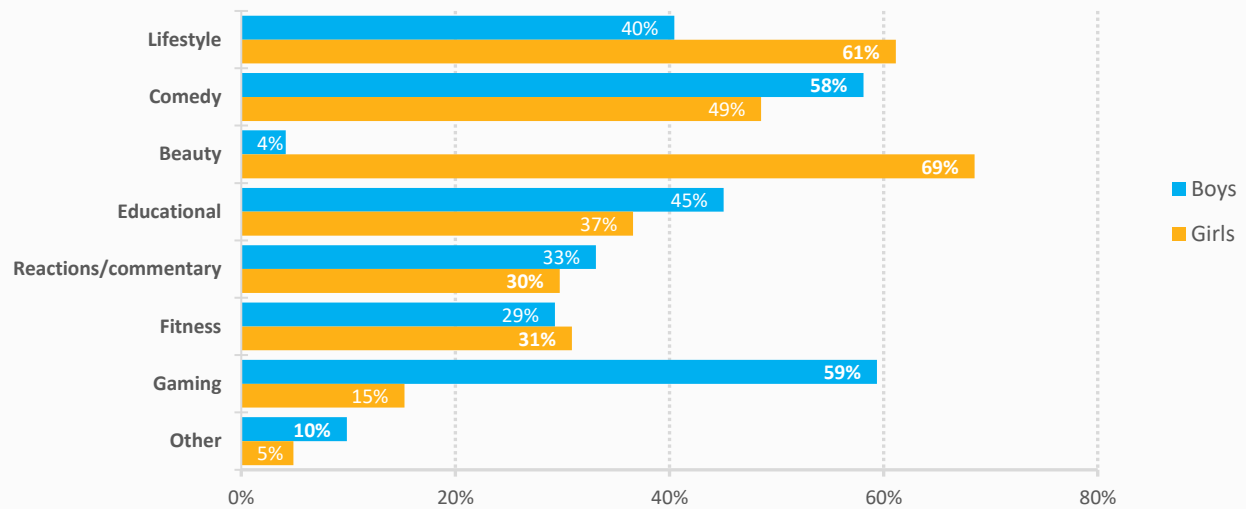
#### Graf 4. Koji tip sadržaja najčešće pratiš kod influensera?

Udio ispitanika prema vrsti sadržaja koji prate (%; višestruki odgovori)



#### Graf 5. Razlika u vrstama sadržaja koje mladi najčešće prate

Udio ispitanika prema vrsti sadržaja i spolu (%; višestruki odgovori)

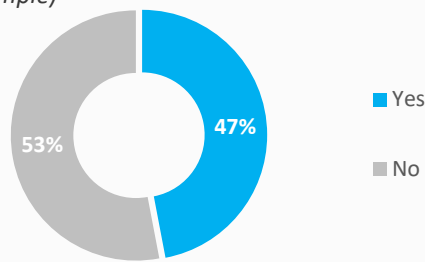


In addition to these categories, participants also highlighted content related to cars and automotive topics, cooking and gastronomy, music, sports, films and series, as well as educational content in areas such as technology, history, medicine, and finance. Some respondents also reported following podcasts, documentaries, and artistic or creative content, while others indicated that they primarily engage with whatever content appears on their feeds or aligns with their personal interests. In this context, exposure to certain types of content is not always the result of conscious choice, but may also be shaped by how platforms personalize and distribute content through **algorithms**<sup>20</sup>. Since girls and boys do not follow the same types of content and are not necessarily exposed to the same recommendations, young people are not exposed to identical messages and narratives. These patterns may have implications for how different groups of young people perceive the influence of influencers, as well as for the potential risks associated with their content.

<sup>20</sup> Algorithm refers to a set of predefined rules and procedures used by digital platforms to collect, process and rank data, with the aim of personalizing and recommending content to users based on their behavior, interests and interactions.

### Graf 6. Do you follow influencers from BiH?

Share of respondents who follow influencers from BiH (% of total sample)



In addition to global influencers, a significant part of young people also follow influencers from BiH, pointing to a strong local digital ecosystem. **Following local influencers appears to be a shared digital habit among young people, regardless of gender or age.** This suggests that domestic influencers have a broad audience and that their content appeals equally to young people across different demographic groups.

Responses from participants frequently mention a smaller number of the same local creators, indicating that young people's interests are not random, but rather shaped around recognizable and established profiles. This pattern demonstrates that young people's online experiences are not shaped exclusively by global content, but are also significantly influenced by local references, topics, and narratives that are more relatable and contextually relevant to them.

## 2. The impact of influencers: importance, trust and behavior of young people

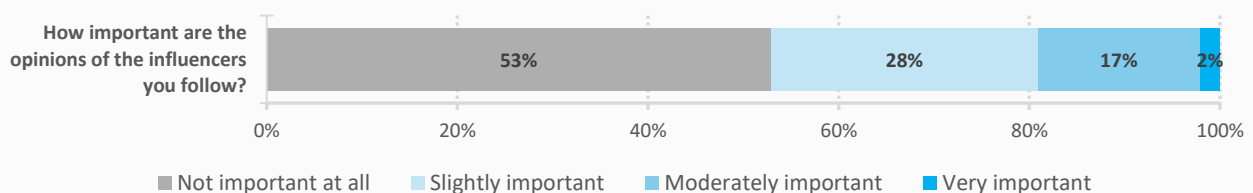
Influencers are not only one of the types of content that young people regularly encounter, but also actors who can shape attitudes, habits, and decisions. Their opinions, messages, and recommendations represent one of several factors that may influence trust, behavioral change, and concrete decisions, including consumer choices.

### 2.1. Importance of influencer opinions

To understand the extent of influencer impact, it is important to examine how much value young people assign to the opinions of influencers they follow. **Nearly half of young people report that influencers' opinions hold some level of importance for them, with no significant differences observed by gender or age.** Although most young people state that influencers' opinions are not decisive, there is a stable share who consider them important to some degree (47% overall). This pattern suggests that influencers do not affect all young people equally, but that their influence remains relevant for a portion of adolescents, particularly in the context of regular engagement with social media content.

### Figure 7. How important are the opinions of the influencers you follow?

Share of respondents by level of importance (Likert scale; %)

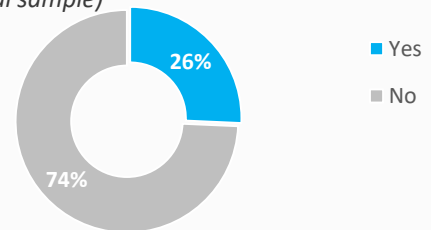


## 2.2. Change in opinions or behavior under the impact of influencers

**More than a quarter of young people report having changed their opinions or certain behavioral patterns after engaging with influencer content, with such experiences being present among both girls and boys, as well as among younger and older adolescents.** Girls more frequently describe changes related to clothing **style, daily habits, nutrition, self-care, and ways of thinking**, often linking influencer impact to personal development, self-confidence, and positive lifestyle changes. In contrast, boys more often report changes related to **physical activity, training, discipline, health, practical advice, as well as certain attitudes and interests.**

**Figure 8. Have you ever changed your opinion or behavior because of an influencer?**

Share of respondents reporting a change in opinion or behavior (% of total sample)



*In a positive way, yes... content about positive thinking has significantly improved my mental health, but it can very easily go in the opposite direction"*  
- Girl, 17-18 years old.

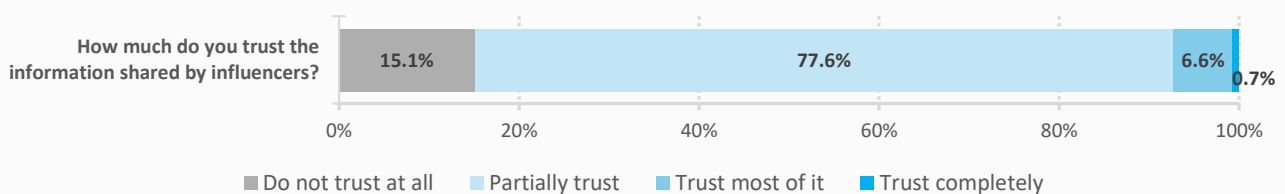
*"Yes, sometimes I change my mind or adjust my daily routine because of the advice of influencers"*  
- Boy, 15-16 years old

## 2.3. Trust in the information shared by influencers

**Most young people express partial trust in the information shared by influencers, with only minor differences observed by gender.** Boys are somewhat more likely than girls to express higher levels of trust, while girls tend to adopt a more cautious and critical stance. No significant differences are observed by age, suggesting that cautious and selective trust in influencer content is a common characteristic across age groups. Overall, this pattern indicates that influencers are generally not perceived as unquestionable authorities, but rather as one of several sources of information in young people's everyday online environment.

**Figure 9. Level of Trust in Information Shared by Influencers**

Distribution of respondents by level of trust (Likert scale; %)



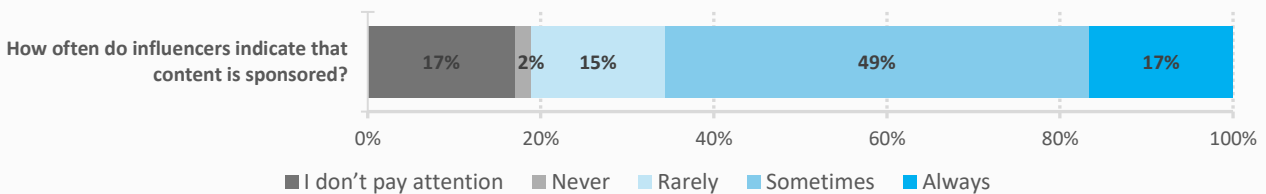
However, for a subset of young people, particularly those who regularly follow influencer content or report changes in their opinions and behaviors such content may carry greater subjective weight in shaping attitudes.

## 2.4. Labeling of sponsored content

**Most young people report that influencers label sponsored content only occasionally, with girls less likely than boys to perceive such content as clearly marked.** Some influencers explicitly label sponsored posts, while others do so more subtly, using brief or less noticeable indicators that can easily be overlooked. On average, boys are somewhat more likely than girls to perceive sponsored content as clearly labeled<sup>21</sup>, while no major differences are observed across age groups. These differences may be linked to the types of content followed. Boys more frequently engage with technology, gaming, sports, or equipment-related content, where sponsorship is often more direct and openly communicated. In such cases, brand collaboration may be integrated into the message itself and therefore easier to recognize. In contrast, girls more often follow lifestyle, fashion, or beauty content, where promotional messages are frequently embedded within personal experiences and presented more subtly, which may create the impression that sponsorship is not clearly disclosed.

**Figure 10. Frequency of Sponsored Content Disclosure by Influencers**

Share of respondents by perceived frequency of disclosure (Likert scale; %)



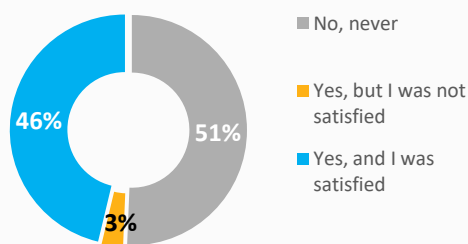
## 2.5. Purchasing products based on influencer recommendations

Beyond general trust and influence, it is important to understand how this relationship translates into concrete behaviors, such as purchasing products recommended by influencers.

**Girls are significantly more likely than boys to report having purchased products based on influencer recommendations and to express satisfaction with those purchases.** Young people who have purchased products recommended by influencers tend to assign greater importance to influencers' opinions<sup>22</sup> and to trust the information they share more than those without such experience<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, clear gender differences are observed<sup>24</sup>, girls more frequently report

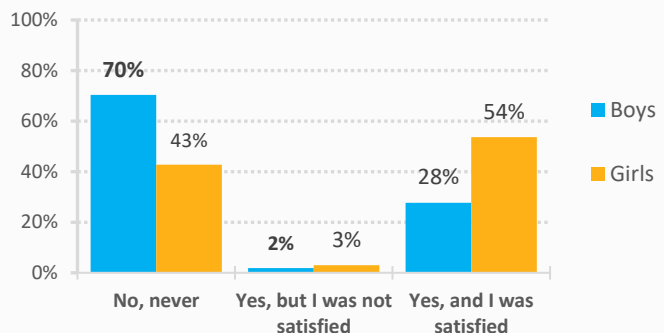
**Figure 11. Have you ever purchased a product recommended by an influencer?**

Share of respondents by purchasing experience based on influencer recommendations (% of total sample)



**Figure 12. Differences in Purchasing Experience**

Share of respondents by purchasing experience based on influencer recommendations (% by gender)



<sup>21</sup> Sponsored content emphasis and gender ( $t = 4.19$ ;  $p < 0.001$ )

<sup>22</sup> The importance of opinion x purchase ;  $F(2.2335) = 4.98$ ;  $p = 0.007$

<sup>23</sup> Belief in information x purchase ;  $F(2.2386) = 22.83$ ;  $p < 0.00$

<sup>24</sup> Online shopping and Gender  $\chi^2(2) = 139.1$ ;  $p < 0.001$

purchasing influencer-recommended products and being satisfied with them, while boys more often report never having made such purchases. No significant differences are observed between age groups.

Experience with purchasing influencer-recommended products is also associated with the amount of time spent following influencer content. Among young people who engage with influencer content for several hours per day, purchasing experiences are more common, and more than half report positive experiences with the products purchased<sup>25</sup>.

## 2.6. Ethical standards and responsibility of influencers

The commercial influence of influencers raises broader questions of ethics, transparency, and responsibility, particularly given that young people are a key audience. **A large majority of young people believe that influencers should adhere to certain rules, with girls, on average, placing greater importance on ethical standards than boys.** Open-ended responses indicate that young people have relatively clear expectations regarding influencer behavior. While core themes are similar, girls tend to emphasize responsibility toward the audience, whereas boys more often focus on general rules of conduct.

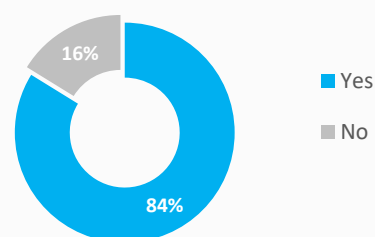
At the center of these expectations is honesty, especially when it comes to the information and recommendations that influencers share with their audience. Many respondents highlight the importance of clearly labeling sponsored content so that audiences can recognize paid promotions: **"they should clearly state when a video is an advertisement or paid promotion"**. There is also a strong emphasis on respectful behavior, which young people describe as: **"basic decency, without insults or vulgar language"**. A significant number of responses also point to responsibility toward younger audiences, given that children also follow influencers. Young people believe influencers should be mindful of the type of content they publish. Finally, concern for the privacy of others is clearly present in responses, indicating that young people do not view influencers solely as content creators, but as public actors whose behavior can have broader societal consequences.

***"Influencers are today's merchants of attention. And attention is the most valuable resource of our time: once they direct it, they can change someone's thoughts, desires, purchases, and even the way young people perceive themselves. So the question of whether they should follow rules actually means: should someone who influences the awareness of others have boundaries?"***  
- Boy, 15-16 years old

**For most young people, adherence to ethical standards is an important aspect of influencer behavior, with girls on average attaching more importance to ethical standards than boys.** While a large majority of young people agree that influencers should follow certain rules, additional findings suggest that these rules are not

**Figure 13. Should influencers follow certain rules?**

Share of respondents who believe influencers should adhere to specific standards of behavior (% of total sample)

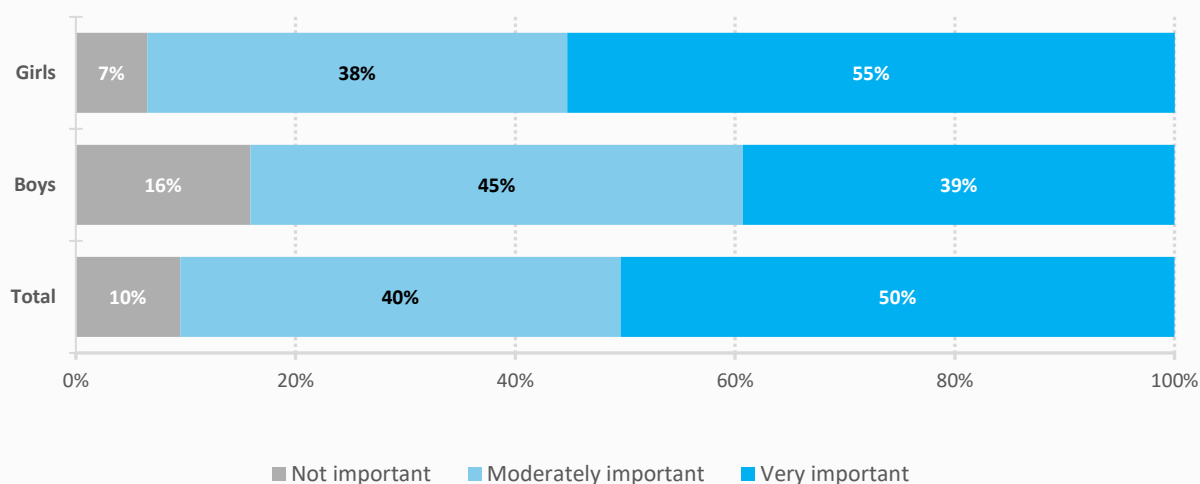


<sup>25</sup> Online shopping and time spent online  $\chi^2(10) = 64.19, p < .001$

perceived as a formality, but as a genuinely important aspect of influencers' public role. As observed in previous findings, girls tend to place greater emphasis on ethical conduct<sup>26</sup>. This difference may reflect varying perspectives in how young people understand influencer responsibility in the online space, particularly in relation to audience protection and the broader impact influencers can have on others.

**Figure 14. How important is it to you that influencers follow ethical standards?**

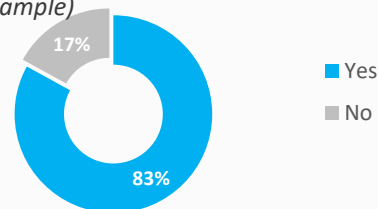
Share of respondents by level of importance of ethical behavior (Likert scale; %)



**The need for influencers to clearly indicate when they are addressing children and minors is recognized by the majority of young people, with this view more strongly expressed among girls than boys.** Young people largely believe that content intended for children and younger audiences should be clearly labeled or appropriately adapted, reflecting a strong awareness of influencers' responsibility toward minors. These views align with earlier findings showing that young people expect ethical and responsible behavior from influencers, particularly when it comes to more vulnerable audience groups.

**Figure 15. Young people's expectations regarding influencers addressing minors**

Share of respondents who believe influencers should clearly indicate when content is directed at children or minors (% of total sample)



Compared to boys, girls more frequently emphasize the importance of clearly labeling content intended for children and minors<sup>27</sup>, which may indicate different perspectives on how younger audiences should be protected in online environments.

## 2.7. The impact of influencers on young people's self-confidence

Young people's experiences with influencer content also include the way they experience their own self-confidence and self-image. **Most young people believe that influencer content can have a negative impact on self-confidence, with girls and older adolescents recognizing this impact more frequently than boys and younger adolescents.** While young people generally recognize the potential negative effects of influencer content, sensitivity to this impact varies slightly across groups. Girls are more likely than boys to express concern about its effect on self-confidence<sup>28</sup>, and older adolescents show somewhat greater awareness of

<sup>26</sup> Compliance with ethical rules of conduct and gender ( $t = -4.52$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

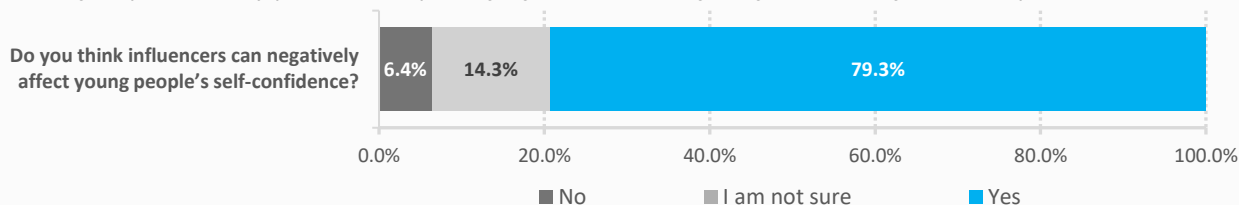
<sup>27</sup> Emphasis on addressing children and gender  $\chi^2(1) = 23.93$ ;  $p < 0.001$

<sup>28</sup> Influence of influencers on self-esteem and gender  $\chi^2(2) = 61.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$

potential negative effects compared to younger ones<sup>29</sup>. Despite these differences, the view that influencer content can negatively affect self-confidence is dominant across all groups.

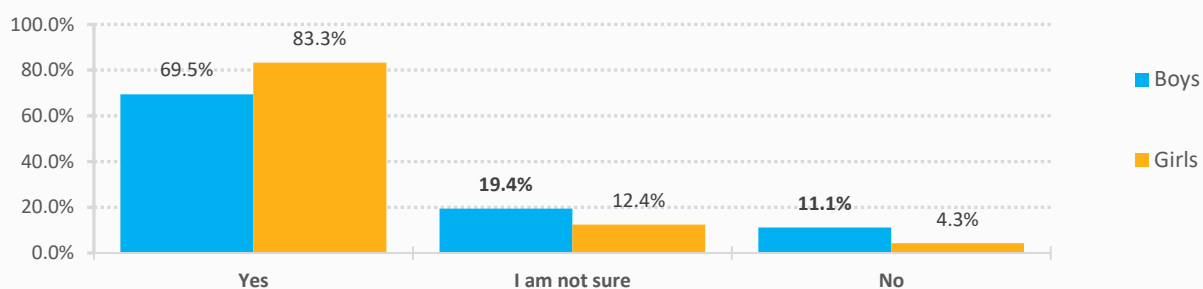
**Figure 16. Perceived negative impact of influencers on young people’s self-confidence**

Share of respondents by perceived impact of influencers on self-confidence (% of total sample)



**Figure 17. Gender differences in perceived negative impact of influencers on self-confidence**

Share of respondents by perceived impact of influencers on self-confidence (% by gender)



The fact that girls and older adolescents more frequently recognize these negative effects may be linked to a greater awareness of social comparison and online pressures. Girls are more often exposed to messages related to appearance and “ideal” lifestyles, while older adolescents, with more experience on social media, are better able to identify patterns that may influence self-perception.

### 3. Perception of harmful and risky content: when does content become a problem?

Young people’s experiences with influencer content also include exposure to content they perceive as risky or harmful. The way young people identify such content, respond to it, and evaluate it represents an important part of their online experience.

#### 3.1. Types of harmful content observed by young people

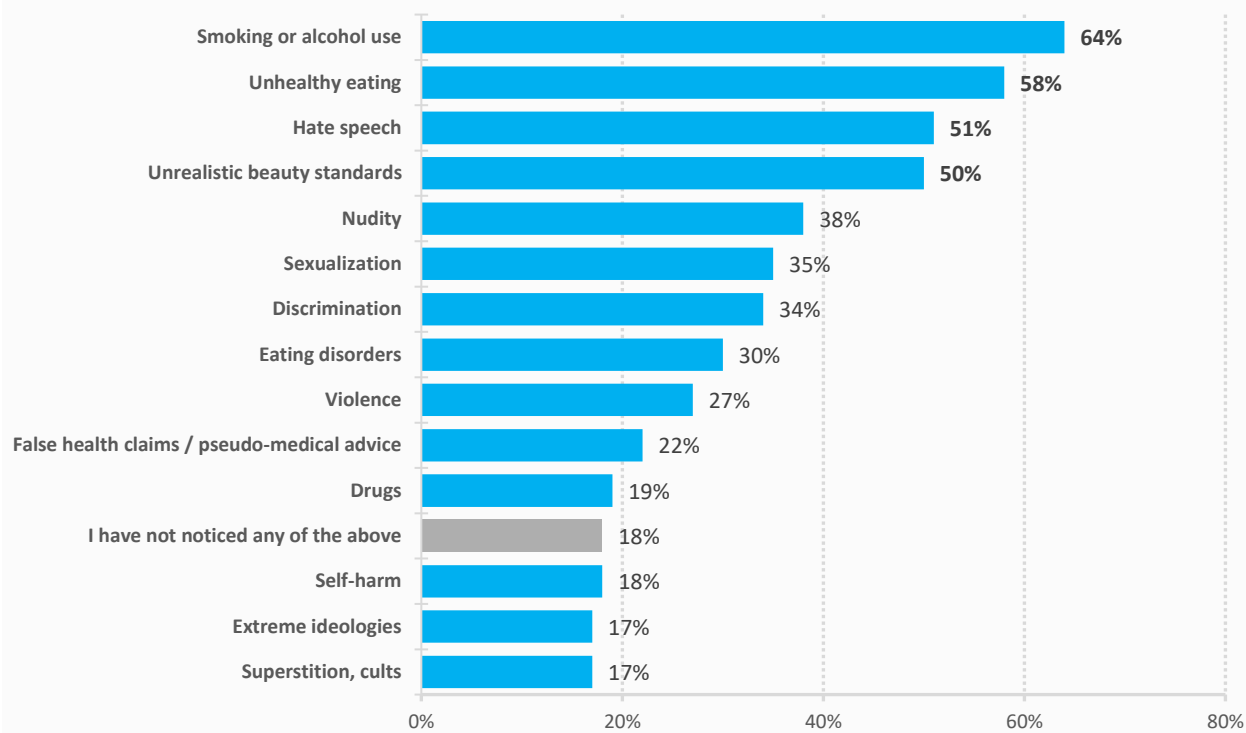
**Young people report noticing a wide range of potentially harmful content in influencer posts, with patterns of perception differing between girls and boys.** The most frequently mentioned types of content include smoking and alcohol use, unrealistic standards of appearance and success, sexualized content, and eating disorders, while topics such as drugs, self-harm, or extreme ideologies are less commonly recognized as part of influencer content. Gender differences further shape these patterns. Compared to boys, girls more frequently highlight content related to unrealistic standards, eating disorders, and discrimination, while boys more often identify content involving smoking and alcohol use, drugs, and/or violence<sup>30</sup>. These differences do not necessarily indicate greater or lower

<sup>29</sup> Influence of influencers on self-esteem and age group  $\chi^2(4) = 13.38, p = 0.010$

<sup>30</sup> Differences in the recognition of individual types of harmful content by gender and age were tested using the chi-square independence test ( $\chi^2$ ), where statistically significant differences were found for most categories ( $p < .05$ ).

sensitivity among specific groups, but rather reflect different patterns of exposure and interpretation of online messages.

**Graf 18. Types of harmful and risky content identified by young people in influencer content**  
*Share of respondents who have identified specific types of harmful content (%; multiple responses allowed)*

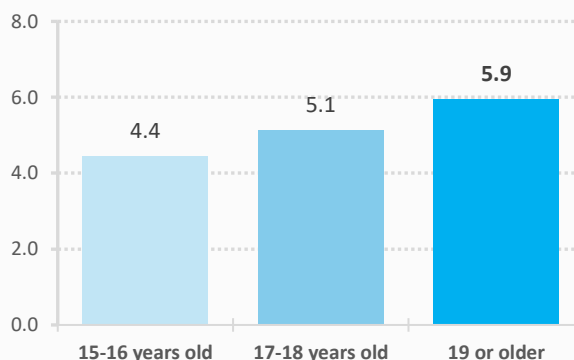


**On average, younger adolescents identify between four and five different types of potentially harmful content in influencer posts, while older adolescents report a higher number.**

This difference does not suggest that younger respondents are less exposed, but rather that older adolescents are more likely to recognize and clearly categorize such content. The total number of identified harmful content types increases with age<sup>31</sup>, which may reflect greater experience with influencer content or a more developed ability to identify and interpret potentially risky messages in the online environment.

**Figure 19. Cumulative exposure to harmful content in influencer posts**

*Average number of different types of harmful content identified by age group*



### 3.2. Content perceived as most harmful

**Young people most often single out content that promote risky behavior, violence and hate speech, as well as content that imposes unrealistic standards of appearance and success.** Although the key topics are similar, girls and boys recognize harmful content in different ways<sup>32</sup>. Girls more

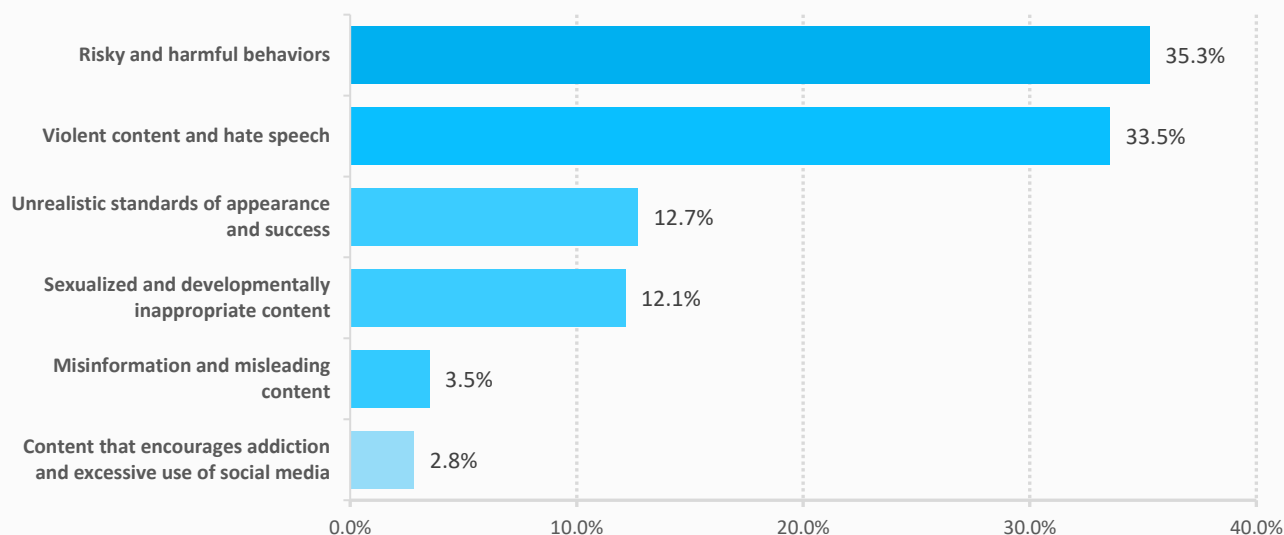
<sup>31</sup> Total number of harmful contents and age group:  $F(2, 2380) = 13.49, p < .001$

<sup>32</sup> After reviewing all the responses, six dominant thematic categories were identified. Each answer is coded into one, the most dominant topic, in order to enable quantification and a clear and transparent interpretation of the findings.

often highlight violent and offensive content, as well as posts that create pressure related to appearance, success, and social comparison. Boys, on the other hand, more frequently point to content promoting risky behaviors, such as gambling, alcohol and drug use, or participation in dangerous online challenges. These patterns suggest that young people tend to recognize harmful content through the lens of what they personally experience as a threat or pressure in their own digital environment.

**Figure 20. Which types of content do you consider most harmful for young people?**

*Categories are based on open-ended responses and reflect the most frequently mentioned themes and patterns.*



**Risky and harmful behaviors:** Content that promotes or normalizes gambling, alcohol and drug use, smoking, self-harm, or dangerous online challenges.

**Violent content and hate speech:** Threats, insults, humiliation, discriminatory language, and explicit or implicit depictions of violence.

**Unrealistic standards of appearance and success:** Content promoting unattainable ideals of body image, luxury, and a “perfect life,” often through filtered visuals and constant comparison.

**Sexualized and developmentally inappropriate content:** Excessive sexualization and explicit or suggestive content not suitable for children and adolescents.

**Misinformation and misleading content:** Inaccurate or manipulative information, particularly related to health, appearance, or so-called “quick fixes” to personal problems.

**Content that encourages addiction and excessive use of social media:** Repetitive, low-quality content that promotes endless scrolling, time loss, and mental fatigue often described by young people as “brainrot”<sup>33</sup>.

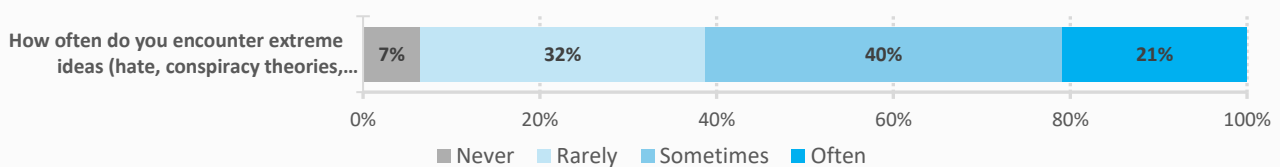
<sup>33</sup> Brainrot is the name given to digital content that is intentionally repetitive, chaotic, or meaningless, designed to quickly grab attention and cause short-term entertainment, often without informative or narrative value.

### 3.3. Exposure to extreme ideas in the online environment

**Most young people report at least occasional exposure to extreme ideas such as hate speech, conspiracy theories or violent content on social networks, with girls<sup>34</sup> and older adolescents<sup>35</sup> on average noticing such content more often than boys and younger adolescents.** Although most young people describe these encounters as occasional, a significant proportion indicate that such content is a regular part of their online environment. These findings suggest that hate speech, conspiracy narratives, and violent messaging are not confined to isolated accounts or platforms, but form part of the broader digital space young people navigate daily. Differences in exposure may also be linked to the types of content different groups follow. Compared to boys, girls are more likely to engage with content related to daily life, personal experiences, social issues, and commentary on current events. These formats often involve opinions, reactions, and discussions, which may increase exposure to polarizing or extreme messages. At the same time, girls are more likely to follow influencers who openly express views on social issues, which may lead to greater exposure to hate speech, conspiracy theories, or violent narratives particularly in comments and related content.

**Figure 21. Frequency of exposure to extreme ideas in influencer content**

Share of respondents by frequency of exposure (% of total sample)

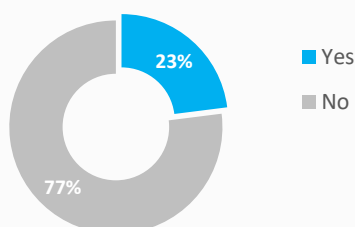


Importantly, more frequent exposure to extreme ideas is also associated with a broader perception of online risk<sup>36</sup>. Young people who encounter such content more often tend to identify a greater number of other harmful and risky elements in influencer content. This suggests that extreme messages rarely appear in isolation, but are part of a wider ecosystem of problematic content.

### 3.4. Feeling of discomfort after viewing influencer content

**Figure 22. Have you ever felt bad or uncomfortable after watching influencer content?**

Share of respondents reporting feelings of discomfort or negative mood (% of total sample)



The perception of harmful content extends beyond recognition and, for some young people, results in emotional reactions. **Nearly one in four young people report having felt uncomfortable or upset at least once after viewing influencer content, with girls reporting such experiences more frequently than boys.** While most young people do not experience negative emotions after engaging with influencer content, for a significant minority, such content can have an adverse emotional impact. Girls more often report feeling uncomfortable<sup>37</sup>, which may be related to the types of

content they are exposed to, as well as broader social pressures present in the online environment.

<sup>34</sup> Gender and exposure to extreme ideas ( $t = -4.60, p < .001$ )

<sup>35</sup> Age and exposure to extreme ideas  $F(2, 2380) = 12.81, p < .001$

<sup>36</sup> The frequency of seeing extreme ideas is related to the total number of recognized harmful and risky contents ( $\rho = 0.43, p < .001$ )

<sup>37</sup> Gender and discomfort  $\chi^2(1) = 8.33, p = .004$

Young people frequently describe discomfort related to public humiliation, hate speech, aggressive comments, and recurring online “drama.” Such content can lead to feelings of frustration and concern, particularly when negative behavior appears to be rewarded with attention and popularity.

*"I felt uncomfortable when some influencers humiliate others to elevate themselves."  
- Girl, 19+ years old.*

*"... When influencers attack or propagate hatred towards a certain group to which I myself belong. "  
- Girl, 19+ years old.*

**Another prominent theme relates to comparison with unrealistic standards of appearance and lifestyle.** Young people, especially girls, often describe feelings of insecurity, low self-confidence, and pressure to look or live in a certain way in order to feel “good enough.” Even when aware that images and videos are filtered and carefully edited, continuous exposure to such content still leaves an emotional impact.

*"I did, because their "perfect life" sometimes creates pressure and makes me feel like I'm not good enough."  
- Girl, 17-18 years old.*

*"I often wonder how they manage to maintain such a perfect routine, perfect appearance, and healthy habits..."  
- Girl, 17-18 years old.*

**Importantly, feelings of discomfort are often associated with a higher awareness of harmful content<sup>38</sup>.** Young people who report negative emotional reactions also tend to identify a greater number of harmful and risky elements in influencer content. This pattern suggests that, for some young people, negative emotional responses may also reflect a more developed critical awareness and a clearer recognition of content that can have harmful effects on individuals or wider audiences.

## 4. Reporting and protection: how do young people react?

Young people’s experiences with risky and harmful content do not end with recognition, but also include how they respond, seek protection, and use available reporting mechanisms. Perceptions of where to turn, how effective these mechanisms are, and whether reporting makes a difference form an important part of their overall sense of safety in the online environment.

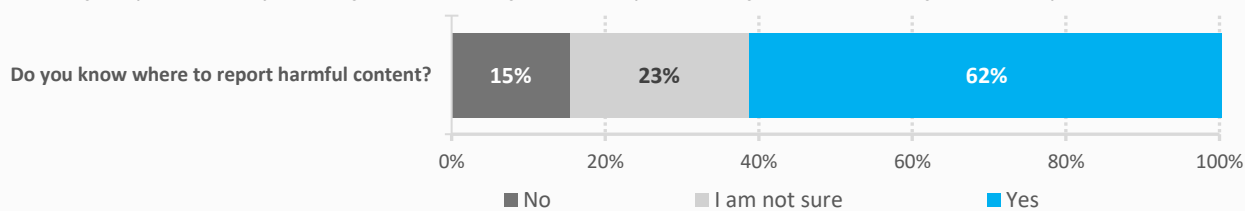
### 4.1. Awareness of reporting harmful content

**Most young people report that they know where to report harmful content, although uncertainty about the process is more common among girls than boys.** While many young people are aware that reporting mechanisms exist, a significant number indicate that they are not fully certain whom to contact or how the process works. This pattern suggests that awareness often remains at a general level, without a clear understanding of concrete steps, which may reduce the likelihood that young people will act when encountering harmful content.

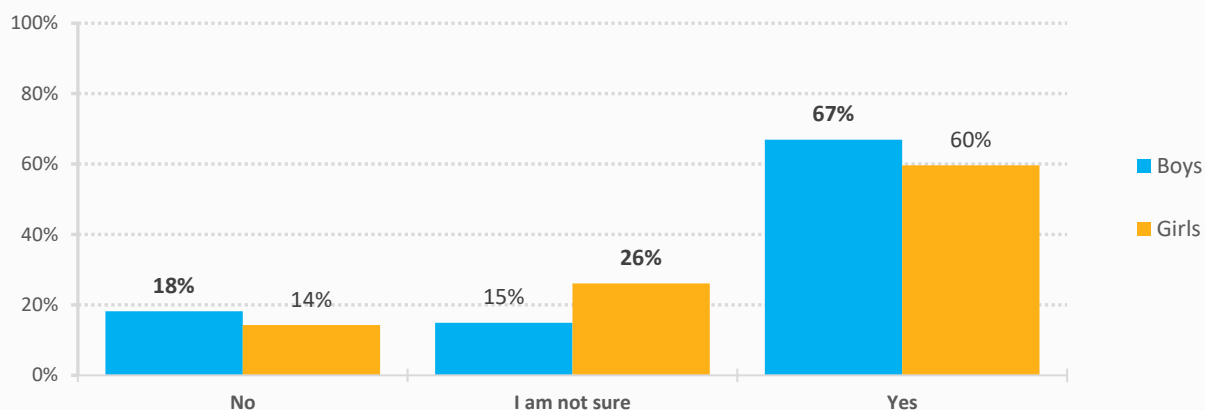
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<sup>38</sup> Feeling of discomfort and harmful content ( $t = -14.97, p < .001$ )

**Figure 23. Awareness of reporting mechanisms for harmful content among young people**  
Share of respondents by level of awareness of how to report harmful content (% of total sample)



**Figure 24. Gender differences in awareness of reporting mechanisms for harmful content**  
Share of respondents by level of awareness (% by gender)



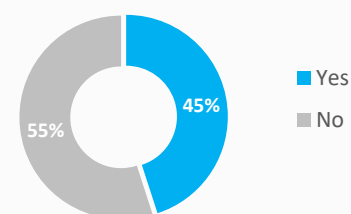
Compared to boys, girls more frequently report uncertainty about where to report harmful content<sup>39</sup>. While boys are more likely to state that they know how and where to report problematic posts, girls are more likely to feel hesitant about the process. This uncertainty may be linked to the types of content girls are more frequently exposed to, as well as to less clearly defined boundaries between what is “unpleasant,” “problematic,” and formally reportable in online spaces

#### 4.2. Experiences with reporting harmful content

**Despite general awareness of reporting mechanisms, reporting harmful content in practice remains relatively rare, with girls and older adolescents more likely to take action than boys and younger adolescents.** For most young people, reporting problematic content is the exception rather than a common response. This pattern may be linked to uncertainty about reporting procedures, doubts about their effectiveness, or the perception that reporting “will not change anything.”

**Figure 25. Have you ever reported harmful content?**

Share of respondents who have ever reported harmful content (% of total sample)



Compared to boys, girls are more likely to report harmful content<sup>40</sup>. This may reflect both greater exposure to problematic content and a stronger sense of responsibility or willingness to respond to content that is offensive, discriminatory, or harmful to others. At the same time, older adolescents

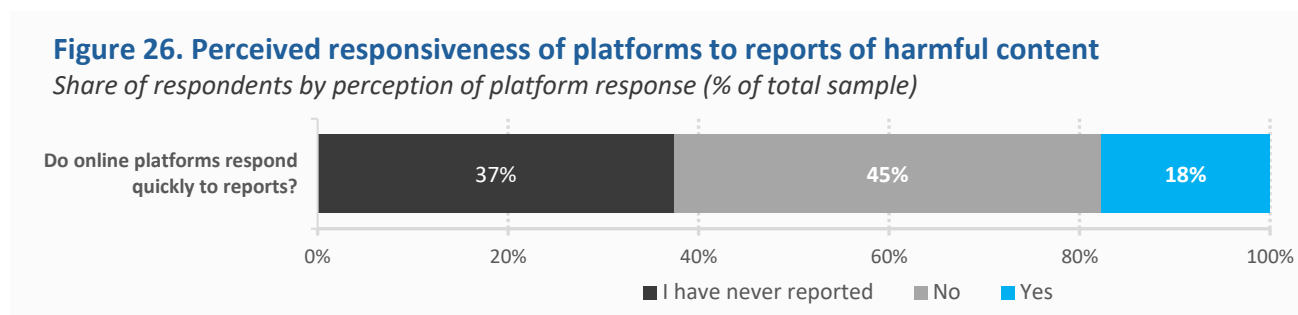
<sup>39</sup> Differences between girls and boys in knowledge about reporting harmful content ;  $\chi^2(1) = 33.27, p < .001$

<sup>40</sup> Gender  $\chi^2(1) = 10.37, p = .001$ .

are more likely than younger ones to report harmful content<sup>41</sup>. As young people grow older, they tend to adopt more active forms of response, which may be associated with greater experience using social media, higher confidence in digital environments, and a clearer understanding of the consequences of harmful online behavior.

#### 4.3. Perception of platform responses

**Most young people do not have the experience of online platforms reacting quickly to reported harmful content, Girls and older adolescents are less likely than boys and younger adolescents to perceive platform responses as adequate.** A significant proportion of young people state that platforms either do not respond or respond slowly, suggesting a perception that reporting often does not lead to visible or timely outcomes. Such experiences may further discourage young people from reporting problematic content, even when they know how to do so.



While boys are more likely to believe that reporting leads to a concrete response, girls more often report that platforms did not respond or that they have never reported harmful content at all<sup>42</sup>. Differences are also observed by age: older adolescents are more likely to report that platforms do not respond quickly, while younger adolescents are somewhat more likely to report positive experiences<sup>43</sup>. This may be linked to the types of content reported by older age groups, as well as to more realistic expectations regarding how platforms operate and the limits of their responsibility. Young people who have reported harmful content are significantly more likely to state that platforms did not respond or did not respond quickly enough, while those who have never reported content often do not have a clear opinion on platform responsiveness<sup>44</sup>. This suggests that direct experience with reporting may reveal limitations of existing protection systems and potentially reduce trust in their effectiveness.

<sup>41</sup> Age group  $\chi^2(2) = 14.14, p < .001$

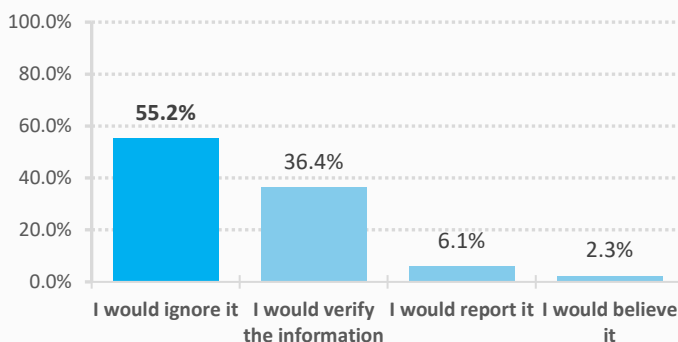
<sup>42</sup> Differences between girls and boys in the perception of platform responses ;  $\chi^2(2) = 30.44, p < .001$

<sup>43</sup> Age Group ;  $\chi^2(4) = 23.40, p < .001$

<sup>44</sup> Perception of platform response and gender:  $\chi^2(2) = 966.40, p < .001$

**Figure 27. How would you respond to the promotion of “medicines” by influencers?**

Share of respondents by type of reaction  
(% of total sample)



When encountering influencer promotions of “medicines” or health-related products, most young people report that they would not trust such messages, but would be more likely to ignore them rather than report them. More than half of young people state that they would simply ignore such content, while just over one third would attempt to verify the information through other sources. This pattern indicates that young people recognize potential risks, but that active responses remain limited.

Compared to boys, girls are more likely to report that they would report such content, but also that they would first verify the information<sup>45</sup>. Boys, on the other hand are more likely to choose ignoring as their primary response. While girls tend to adopt a more cautious and protective approach, boys more often distance themselves from content they perceive as unreliable. Age differences are also evident: older adolescents are more likely to report or verify such content, while younger adolescents are more likely to ignore it<sup>46</sup>. As young people grow older, there is a greater tendency toward more active and informed responses, which may be linked to increased experience in online environments and more developed critical thinking regarding potentially harmful health-related content.

**It is important to emphasize that the reactions of young people are related to the level of trust in influencers.** Those who place greater trust in influencer-shared information are more likely to believe promotional claims about “medicines,” while those with lower levels of trust are more likely to verify information or ignore such content<sup>47</sup>. This finding highlights that trust in influencers directly shapes how young people assess and interpret potentially risky health-related messages.

## 5. Regulation and responsibilities: what do young people expect?

Given the presence of harmful and risky content in the online environment, it is important to understand how young people perceive responsibility and protection in digital spaces. In this context, young people expressed their views on who should be held responsible for online content and what measures they consider most effective to protect themselves and others.

### 5.1. The role of the state in regulation

**Most young people believe that the state should regulate the work of influencers, although uncertainty and opposition are more pronounced among boys and younger adolescents.** Nearly half of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina support the idea of state regulation of influencers, while around one third remain undecided. This distribution suggests that regulation is not a marginal issue for young people, but one that prompts reflection, dilemmas, and diverse perspectives.

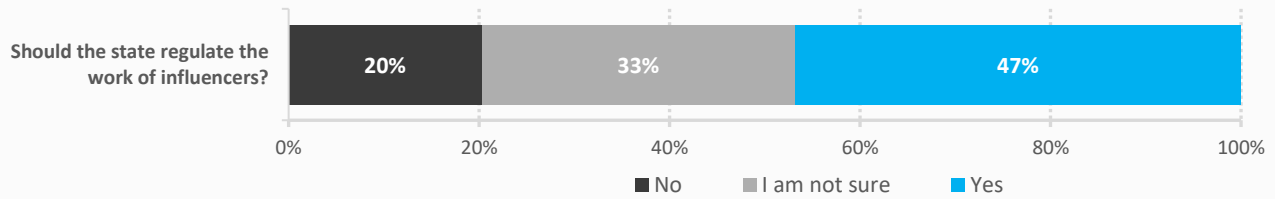
<sup>45</sup> Reactions to the promotion of “drugs” and gender (3)  $\chi^2 = 10.36$ ,  $p = .016$ .

<sup>46</sup> Reactions to the promotion of “drugs” and age group  $\chi^2(6) = 15.76$ ,  $p = .015$ .

<sup>47</sup> Reactions to the promotion of “drugs” are related to the level of trust in the information that influencers publish ;  $F(3, 2385) = 11.43$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Figure 28. Young people's attitudes toward state regulation of influencers**

Share of respondents by views on the role of the state in regulating influencers (% of total sample)



Gender differences further shape these views. Girls are more likely than boys to support regulation, while boys are more likely to express opposition or uncertainty<sup>48</sup>. Girls more often emphasize audience protection, ethical behavior, and the impact of content on younger users, and may therefore view clear rules as a form of protection. When it comes to the age group, younger adolescents (15-16 years old) are more likely to state that they are not sure whether the state should regulate the work of influencers, while support for regulation increases with age<sup>49</sup>. Among older adolescents, there is a clearer position that regulation is necessary, which may reflect a growing awareness of the long-term consequences of online content and the role of influencers as public actors whose impact extends beyond the personal sphere.

**Young people who support the regulation of influencers' work on average also notice a larger number of different harmful and risky content in influencer posts<sup>50</sup>.** Young people who do not see the need for regulation or are undecided on average recognize a slightly smaller number of problematic content. These findings suggest that attitudes towards regulation do not stem from abstract or political beliefs, but are largely based on personal experiences and daily encounters with online content. The more often young people recognize potentially harmful messages in the influencer environment, the greater their tendency to support state regulation.

## 5.2. Perception of responsibility for influencer content

**Young people most commonly believe that influencers themselves and digital platforms are the primary actors responsible for the content being shared, while the roles of parents and the state are mentioned less frequently.** More than half of young people see influencers as the key actors responsible for the content they share, while nearly half also recognize the important role of platforms. In contrast, responsibility is less often attributed to parents and the state, suggesting that young people primarily associate responsibility with those who have direct control over content and its visibility.

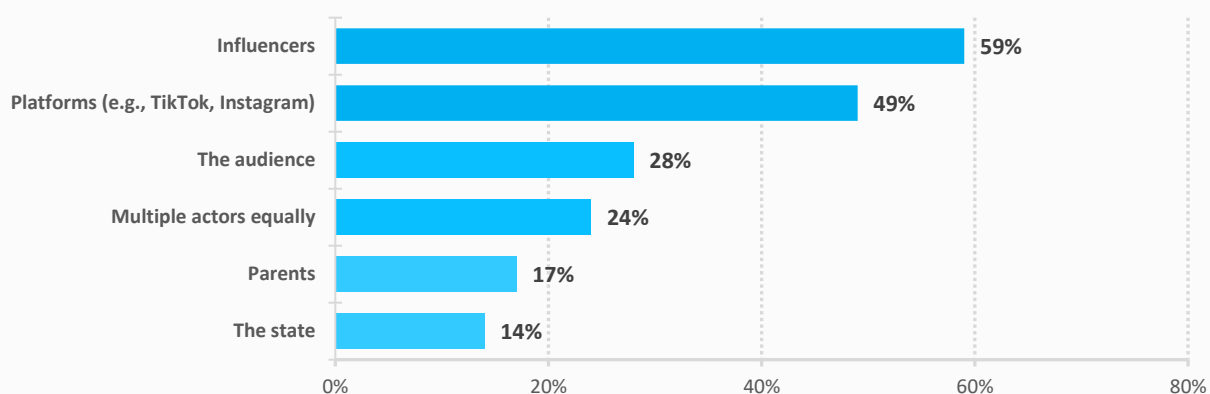
<sup>48</sup> Attitude on the need for state regulation of the work of influencers and gender:  $\chi^2(2) = 73.61, p < .001$

<sup>49</sup> Attitude on the need for state regulation of the work of influencers and age:  $\chi^2(4) = 40.74, p < .001$

<sup>50</sup> Differences in the average number of recognized harmful contents (harm count) according to the position on regulation:  $F(2, 2386) = 18.28, p < .001$

**Figure 29. Who do you think is most responsible for the content influencers publish?**

*Distribution of respondents by actors they assign responsibility to (%; multiple responses allowed)*



Gender differences show that boys are somewhat more likely than girls to emphasize responsibility of the audience<sup>51</sup>, while girls more often highlight the role of platforms, parents, or shared responsibility among multiple actors<sup>52</sup>. This pattern may indicate that girls are more likely to recognize the complexity of the digital environment and the need for shared responsibility, while boys tend to focus more on individual actors. Age differences are particularly evident when it comes to the role of platforms and the state. Older adolescents are more likely to emphasize the responsibility of platforms<sup>53</sup> and the state<sup>54</sup>, while younger adolescents are less likely to recognize their role. As young people grow older, there is a growing awareness that rules, algorithms and content moderation play an important role in shaping the online space, which may explain the greater willingness of older respondents to extend responsibility beyond the influencers themselves.

### 5.3. Measures that young people see as protection in the online space

**When discussing protection from harmful influencer content, young people place the greatest importance on media literacy and education, while restrictive or punitive measures are less frequently seen as primary solutions.** More than half of young people believe that strengthening critical thinking and the ability to independently assess online content would be the most effective form of protection. A somewhat smaller, but still significant, proportion supports stricter content controls, while around one third believe that better laws are needed. Education of influencers themselves is less frequently mentioned as a key measure, suggesting that young people place greater emphasis on the role of the audience and their own ability to navigate the online environment, rather than on changing influencer behavior.

<sup>51</sup> Platform Responsibility and Gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 9.51, p = .002$

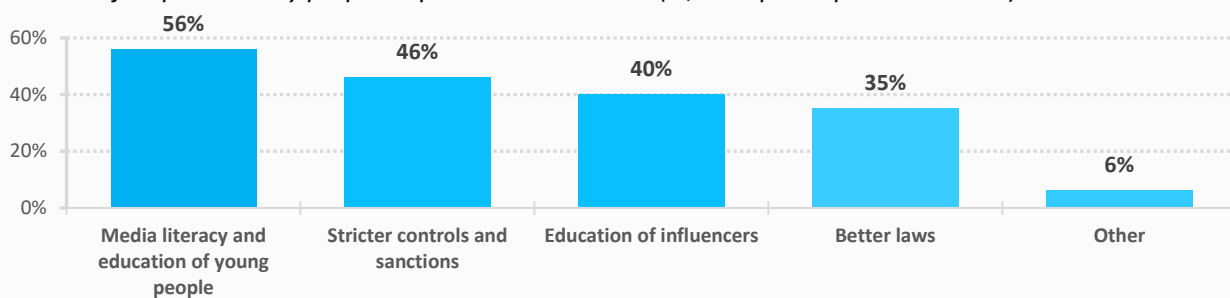
<sup>52</sup> Responsibility "several equals" and gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 5.16, p = .023$

<sup>53</sup> Platform Responsibility and Age:  $\chi^2(2) = 10.88, p = .004$

<sup>54</sup> State responsibility and age:  $\chi^2(2) = 9.61, p = .008$

**Figure 30. What would help most to protect young people online?**

Share of respondents by proposed protection measures (%; multiple responses allowed)



Gender differences further shape young people's attitudes towards protection measures in the online space. Girls are more likely than boys to support measures that include stricter controls<sup>55</sup> and the development of media literacy<sup>56</sup>, while boys are somewhat more inclined to believe that additional protection is not necessary or that the responsibility lies primarily with the individual. Differences by age further reinforces these patterns. Older adolescents are more likely to support stricter controls<sup>57</sup>, better regulation, and systemic measures<sup>58</sup>, while younger adolescents are more likely to remain reserved or rely on individual responsibility.

Open-ended responses show that young people do not view protection solely through formal measures, but also through values, upbringing, and personal responsibility. The most frequently emphasized view is that parents play a key role in protecting children and young people from harmful online content—particularly among girls and younger adolescents. Parental supervision, communication, and setting boundaries are highlighted, especially for children under the age of 14 or 15.

*„... There will always be someone who will ignore the protective measures or find a way to bypass them. The biggest measure of protection is for parents to check their phones regularly, but also to respect the privacy of children.”*  
- Girl, 15-16 years old.

Another prominent theme is the belief that young people should protect themselves through critical thinking and conscious choices. This perspective is particularly strong among boys. Young people emphasize that “no one can protect children instead of themselves,” and that protection involves the ability to critically assess, consciously choose, or ignore content, alongside self-regulation in social media use.

*“Honestly, I think young people need to become more aware themselves. Nothing will really help unless they ask themselves whether something is good or not, and work on using [social media] less”*  
- Girl, 17-18 years old.

A smaller, but vocal group of young people advocates for clearer restrictions, age limits, and stronger intervention by the state and platforms. These responses emphasize the need for clearly defined rules regarding content appropriate for minors, age restrictions for access to certain platforms or content,

<sup>55</sup> Stricter content controls and gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 4.78, p = .029$

<sup>56</sup> Media literacy/youth education and gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 7.58, p = .006$

<sup>57</sup> Stricter content controls and age:  $\chi^2(2) = 20.83, p < .001$

<sup>58</sup> Better laws and age:  $\chi^2(2) = 12.04, p = .002$

stricter moderation and removal of harmful posts, and more active responses from both the state and platforms when such content is not adequately addressed.

*"tricter regulation of content, state involvement in cases where platforms fail to regulate, and education of young people, since it is not possible to regulate all content"*

*– Boy, 15-16 years old.*

Overall, young people do not perceive online protection as a single universal solution or the responsibility of one actor alone. Instead, they see it as a combination of upbringing, personal responsibility, critical thinking, and clearly defined rules, in which parents, platforms, and the state play complementary roles.

## Conclusion

The research shows that influencers have become a regular part of the digital environment of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina present in the content they consume daily, in the topics they discuss, and in the messages repeatedly delivered through algorithmic recommendations. However, young people's relationship with influencers is not one-dimensional. Alongside recognizing the informative and entertaining aspects, they also clearly identify issues of reliability, commercial interests, and the risks associated with such content. The findings highlight the need to view the online environment as a space that offers opportunities, but also requires protection, accountability, and support for young people.

**The online experience of young people is intense and diverse, meaning that the "impact of influencers" is not the same for everyone:** Young people engage with different platforms and types of content, and are therefore exposed to different messages and pressures. These differences indicate that young people's digital experiences are segmented, and that perceptions of both benefits and risks vary across groups.

**Young people do not follow influencers uncritically, selective trust and caution prevail:** The findings suggest that young people most often occupy a "middle position" they follow the content, but do not fully trust it. This suggests that there is a strong foundation for strengthening critical thinking, but also that young people need clearer support in identifying reliable information, particularly when content is presented as advice or fact.

**The commercial nature of influencer content is recognized, but transparency is not consistent:** Young people are aware that influencer content often includes promotions and sponsorships, yet they feel that these are not always clearly labeled. This indicates that transparency is not merely a formal requirement, but a key condition for enabling young people to distinguish between genuine recommendations and paid promotions..

**Risks have been recognized, young people describe exposure to harmful messages and content, and some of them describe specific emotional consequences:** Young people report that they encounter content in the online space that they perceive as problematic, including social pressures, the normalization of risky behaviors, and exposure to extreme or offensive narratives. For some, these experiences are linked to feelings of discomfort and negative emotions, highlighting that the digital environment is not neutral and it can shape self-perception, sense of safety, and overall well-being.

**There is a "gap" between protection mechanisms and the actual experience of young people:** While many are aware that reporting mechanisms exist, reporting is not a common response in practice, and trust in platform responses remains limited. This suggests that protection systems are often not sufficiently clear, responsive, or visible to young people when they encounter harmful content.

**Young people expect responsibility, primarily from influencers and platforms, but they also emphasize the role of knowledge and supportive environment:** In the attitudes of young people, responsibility is most often attributed to those who create and distribute content. At the same time, young people highlight that online protection requires a combination of more responsible influencer behavior, clearer rules and platform moderation, and stronger media literacy, supported by families and schools, especially for younger age groups.

Overall, the findings indicate that creating a safer online environment for young people requires a balanced approach: clearer rules and greater transparency, more accountable action from platforms and influencers, and continuous support to help young people develop critical thinking skills and recognize content that may harm their well-being.

## Recommendations

### 1. Strengthen media literacy of young people as a first line of protection

Findings show that young people most often identify education and critical thinking as the key way to protect themselves from harmful online content. At the same time, many express only partial trust in influencer information, and sponsored content is often not clearly recognized.

- *Systematically integrate media and digital literacy into formal education through short, practical modules within class sessions or ICT subjects, with support from pedagogical institutes and teachers.*
- *Develop content directly reflecting patterns identified in the research: recognizing sponsored content, distinguishing facts from opinions, verifying information (especially "health advice" and "miracle cure" claims), and identifying risky messages (unrealistic standards, hate speech, violence, risky challenges).*
- *Adapt educational materials to the platforms young people use most (e.g. TikTok and Instagram), using formats such as short videos, stories, and live content—where both advertising and risky messages frequently appear.*
- *Place particular focus on younger adolescents, who are more likely to feel uncertain or rely on individual judgment without sufficient tools for critical interpretation.*

### 2. Strengthen the transparency of sponsored content and commercial messages

Young people often report that influencers only occasionally disclose sponsored content, and a portion of youth, particularly girls, purchase products based on influencer recommendations.

- *In cooperation with RAK, platforms, and relevant institutions, develop clear guidelines for labeling sponsored content in formats young people actually consume (stories, reels, TikTok videos), including minimum visibility standards (e.g. labels at the beginning and in descriptions, not only in small or hidden formats).*

- *Develop youth-focused communication materials such as: “How to recognize an ad when it looks like a personal recommendation”, using examples of subtle promotional strategies identified in the research.*
- *Encourage brands and agencies to include clear disclosure requirements and prohibitions of covert advertising targeting minors in partnership agreements with influencers.*

### **3. Make reporting mechanisms more visible, simple and "worth the effort"**

Although most young people say they know where to report harmful content, reporting remains rare in practice, and trust in platform responses is often limited or unclear.

- *Introduce simple, clear guidance in schools and youth structures (student councils, youth clubs, youth centers) on “where and how to report” by platform and type of content (e.g. hate speech, threats, sexualized content, false health claims).*
- *In collaboration with platforms and RAK, develop simple visuals and short video guides adapted to TikTok and Instagram, where young people spend most of their time.*
- *Improve feedback transparency: explain to young people what happens after a report is submitted and which types of content are most likely to be removed; findings suggest that lack of visible outcomes reduces trust in the system.*
- *Establish “safe points” in schools (e.g. school psychologists, pedagogues, teachers) where young people can seek support when content is distressing, especially in cases where platform responses are slow or insufficient.*

### **4. Establish clearer rules for content targeting children and minors**

Most young people recognize the need for influencers to clearly indicate when content is directed at children and minors, with this view more strongly expressed among girls.

- *Develop recommendations for “age-sensitive content” in collaboration with RAK, child protection experts, and platforms, defining what is inappropriate, how it should be labeled, and how exposure to minors can be limited.*
- *Encourage influencers to use clear labels (e.g. “18+ content,” “not suitable for children”) when addressing topics identified as risky by young people (alcohol, smoking, sexualization, violence, gambling, dangerous challenges).*
- *Engage parents through short, practical guides on privacy settings and parental controls, emphasizing a balanced approach highlighted by young people: combining supervision with open communication and respect for privacy.*

### **5. Develop a balanced regulatory framework in dialogue with youth, platforms and industry**

A significant share of young people support the role of the state in regulation, although uncertainty remains among younger adolescents and opposition is more pronounced among boys highlighting the need for an approach that clearly explains the purpose and limits of regulation.

- *Initiate structured dialogue among the RAK, relevant institutions, platforms, schools, and youth organizations to define minimum standards: transparent advertising, protection of minors, faster removal of harmful content, and clearer reporting procedures.*

- Engage young people as active contributors through mreSVUBiH and other participation mechanisms, as findings show they have clear expectations regarding the responsibility of influencers and platforms.
- Communicate regulation in a way that resonates with young people: emphasizing protection, transparency, and accountability, and clarifying that regulation is not about restricting the internet, but about setting clearer rules in a space where minors are present.

## 6. Link the online environment with support for mental health and well-being of young people

Some young people report discomfort and negative emotions after consuming influencer content, particularly in relation to unrealistic standards of appearance and success, especially among girls and older adolescents.

- Integrate short discussion tools into school-based prevention and support programmes (pedagogical and psychological services) addressing online comparison, pressure, and “perfect life” narratives, as young people report these have a real emotional impact.
- Develop messages and materials that avoid moralizing and instead offer practical self-regulation strategies: recognizing content that negatively affects mood, taking breaks, curating feeds, blocking, and reporting.
- Use young people’s voices in campaigns and school activities to ensure authenticity and alignment with real experiences described in the research.

## Appendix

Sample

**Table A1. Structure of the sample according to the place of residence**

Place of residence		
	Frequencies	Percentages
City	1107	46%
Smaller urban area	979	41%
Rural area	303	13%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2389</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table A2. Structure of students by Administrative unit**

Administrative Unit		
	Frequencies	Percentages
Federation of BiH	1558	65%
Republic of Srpska	788	33%
Brčko District	18	1%
N/A	25	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2389</b>	<b>100%</b>
Cantons (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina)		
	Frequencies	Percentages
Sarajevo Canton	370	24%
Zenica-Doboj Canton	303	19%
Herzegovina-Neretva Canton	270	17%

Tuzla Canton	210	13%
Posavina Canton	102	7%
Central Bosnia Canton	89	6%
Una-Sana Canton	78	5%
West Herzegovina Canton	74	5%
Bosnian-Podrinje Canton	37	2%
Canton 10	25	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1558</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Questionnaire

### ATTITUDES OF YOUNG PEOPLE TOWARDS INFLUENCERS AND THEIR CONTENT

The online environment is becoming an increasingly important part of young people's lives, but it also brings risks such as misinformation, harmful content, and unclear rules for influencers. The Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA/RAK) is working to improve regulation in this area, while across Europe there is a growing introduction of rules related to vloggers, YouTubers, and influencers.

To better understand what young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina watch on social media, how much influencers affect their attitudes, and what risks they perceive, the Network of Student Councils of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in cooperation with the CRA/RAK and UNICEF, is conducting this research.

Your answers will help improve online safety and media literacy among young people.

#### Who's participating in the research?

The research includes secondary school students from different parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This group has been selected because high school students are among the most active users of social media, and their experiences and opinions provide the most relevant insights into the role of influencers.

#### Important information before you start:

- Participation in this research is voluntary. You may stop completing the questionnaire at any time, and your decision to participate or not will have no impact on your school, grades, or any other aspect.
- The survey is anonymous. We do not collect your name, surname, date of birth, or any information that could identify you.
- Your responses will be used solely for research purposes and will be presented only in aggregated form.

#### Do you agree to take part in this research? (required)

- Yes, I want to participate.
- No, I don't want to participate.

***(If the answer is "No", the questionnaire automatically ends.)***

## I. GENERAL INFORMATION

### 1. Gender:

Male  Female  Prefer not to say

**2. How old are you?**

13–14  15–16  17–18  19 or more

**3. Place where you live:**

City  Smaller urban area  Rural area

**4. What city/city do you live in?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**II. YOUR USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

**5. Which social networks do you use most often? (you can mark multiple answers)**

Instagram  TikTok  YouTube  Snapchat  Facebook

X (Twitter)  Privee  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**6. How much time do you spend watching influencers' content per day?**

Less than 30 minutes

30 min – 1 hour

1-2 hours

2-4 hours

More than 4 hours

More than 6 hours

**7. What type of content do you follow most often?**

Lifestyle  Comedy  Gaming  Educational

Beauty  Fitness  Reactions/Commentary

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Do you follow influencers from BiH?**

Yes  No

If yes, list some: \_\_\_\_\_

**III. YOUR ATTITUDES TOWARD INFLUENCERS**

**9. How important is the opinion of the influencers that you follow to you?**

- It doesn't matter at all
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important

**10. Have you ever changed your opinion or behavior because of influencers?**

- Yes  No

If yes, in what way? (e.g. style, habits, opinion): \_\_\_\_\_

**11. How much do you trust the information that influencers publish?**

- I don't trust it at all
- I trust it partially
- I trust most of it
- I trust it completely

**12. How often do influencers clearly indicate that content is sponsored?**

- Always  Sometimes  Rarely  Never  I don't pay attention

**13. Have you ever purchased something recommended by an influencer?**

- Yes, and I was satisfied
- Yes, and I was not satisfied
- No, never

**14. Do influencers need to follow certain rules?**

- Yes  No

If yes, which rules: \_\_\_\_\_

**15. How important is it to you that influencers respect the rules of proper behavior (ethical standards)?**

- Not important
- Moderately important
- Very important

**16. Do you think that influencers can have a negative impact on young people's self-confidence?**

Yes  No  I'm not sure

**17. Should influencers clearly indicate when their content is directed at children and minors?**

Yes  No

#### **IV. PERCEPTION OF HARMFUL AND RISKY CONTENT**

**18. Have you ever noticed any of the following types of content in influencer posts? (select all that apply)**

- Smoking or alcohol use
- Drugs
- Self-harm
- Unhealthy eating
- Eating disorders
- Unrealistic beauty standards
- Sexualization
- Nudity
- Hate speech
- Violence
- Discrimination
- False health claims / pseudo-medical advice
- Superstition, cults
- Extreme ideologies
- I have not noticed any of the above

**19. Which types of content do you consider most harmful for young people?**

---

**20. Have you ever felt uncomfortable after watching influencer content?**

Yes  No

**21. Do you know where to report harmful content?**

Yes  No  I'm not sure

**22. Have you ever reported harmful content?**

Yes  No

**23. Do online platforms respond quickly to reports?**

Yes  No  Never reported

**24. How often do you encounter extreme ideas (hate, conspiracy theories, violence, etc.)?**

Never  Rarely  Sometimes  Often

**25. How would you respond to influencers promoting “medicines” or health products?**

I would believe it

I would ignore it

I would verify the information

I would report it

**V. REGULATION AND RESPONSIBILITY**

**26. Do you think the state should regulate the work of influencers?**

Yes  No  I'm not sure

**27. Who do you think is most responsible for the content that influencers post?**

Influencers  Platforms (e.g. TikTok, Instagram)  Parents  State  Audience  More of them equally

**28. What's the best way to protect young people online?**

Educating influencers  Stricter controls and sanctions  Better laws  Media literacy and education of young people

Other: \_\_\_\_\_