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# Strengthening digital resilience through youth empowerment: a global, youth-centered approach

by Martina Matijević

In today's interconnected world, the Internet has become the primary space for communication exchange, informal learning, entertainment, and identity formation – especially among youth. This growing digital immersion brings a range of risks, including cyberbullying, disinformation, online scams, exploitation, data misuse, and others. Yet digital resilience – the ability to navigate and recover from these risks – remains underdeveloped in many parts of the world.

One of the most urgent reasons to strengthen digital resilience among young people is that they are the most active users online. According to a study by Nagata et al. (2025), 69.5% of adolescents aged 11 to 15 have at least one social media account, including 63.8% of children under 13, despite minimum age restrictions. However, not all youth are equally protected or prepared to face cyber threats. In fact, a significant proportion of the world's youth live in developing countries where digital education often lags behind growing Internet access.

To address this imbalance and promote meaningful youth engagement, a comprehensive, multi-level strategy is required – one that goes beyond surface-level campaigns and empowers young people as agents of change. This article proposes two interlinked strategies: a three-phase, age-targeted institutional framework and the appointment of a UN Goodwill Ambassador for Digital Resilience.

## A three-phase youth engagement framework

Digital resilience education must be adapted to the developmental stage of the learner. To do so, a three-phase model is proposed:

### Phase 1: middle school students (ages 11-14)

In this phase, schools and police departments should collaborate to deliver interactive workshops



that teach students how to safely navigate social media, recognize potential online threats, and protect their privacy. Crucially, these workshops must be participatory rather than lecture-based. At the end of each workshop, students should be given a creative task (e.g., developing a poster campaign, conducting a peer survey, or creating a digital story) to complete over a set period.

Following this, police officers or digital safety educators would return to evaluate the students' progress and continue the discussion. Schools could also encourage students to organize public awareness events, allowing them to engage and educate their wider communities about digital resilience in an empowering and visible way.

### **Phase 2: high school students (ages 15–18)**

At this stage, the content should evolve to reflect the growing complexity of adolescents' digital lives. Workshops should address more advanced topics such as cyberbullying, phishing, doxxing, and algorithmic manipulation. Students should take on leadership roles – for example, by forming digital safety clubs or leading peer-to-peer mentoring initiatives.

**“Active involvement remains essential: learners must not simply absorb information, but apply it through debates, simulations, media content analysis (including misinformation and disinformation), and campaign development.”**

### **Phase 3: young adults (ages 19–24)**

Universities, especially departments of computer science, psychology, education, and law, should play a proactive role in fostering digital resilience among youth. Courses dedicated to online ethics, privacy, digital rights, and cybersecurity should be integrated into undergraduate and non-degree programs. For students not enrolled in these courses, departments should offer regular workshops open to all disciplines.

Young adults should be encouraged to co-design these learning opportunities — whether by conducting research, facilitating discussions, or launching local digital literacy initiatives.

## Appointing a UN Goodwill Ambassador for digital resilience

While grassroots and institutional efforts are essential, broader visibility can amplify their impact. A youth-centered, globally recognized public figure could play a valuable role, if selected carefully.

**“The United Nations should consider appointing a Goodwill Ambassador for Digital Resilience, ideally someone from the youth demographic who has a strong and respected online presence.”**

This ambassador should advocate for awareness of digital challenges and cyber threats affecting youth – such as online harassment, body shaming, or misinformation – through clear, authentic storytelling rather than technical jargon. Research shows that the mere-exposure effect – the tendency to be influenced by familiar figures – can make these messages more relatable, resonant, and memorable.

The chosen ambassador should engage their audience through informal, narrative-based education, using their platforms to raise awareness in an emotionally resonant way, rather than a commercially driven one.

This approach could ensure global reach and accessibility, especially when combined with localized programs in schools and universities. It also aligns with the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including quality education, reduced inequalities, and peaceful, inclusive societies.

## Conclusion: a dual approach for a resilient future

The challenges of digital life cannot be addressed through awareness alone. They demand participation, structure, and representation. By combining institutional, age-sensitive education programs – especially in developing countries – with the outreach capacity of a well-selected Goodwill Ambassador, we can foster a global ecosystem of youth-led digital resilience.

This approach is not only about protecting youth from cyber threats; it is also about empowering them to recognize, resist, and reshape the digital world *together*.

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### About the Author

**Martina Matijević** is a law student from Croatia with a strong interest in the intersection of law, society, and human behaviour. She has authored several articles on human rights, corporate law, and the role of psychology in ensuring the effective and ethical functioning of legal practitioners. Her work reflects a commitment to exploring both the structural and human dimensions of legal systems, with the aim of promoting justice, accountability, and professional well-being.

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