

Youth in the Digital Age: Social Media, Technology and Substance Use

ISSUP Global and the ISSUP Youth Network, in collaboration with CICAD and the Inter-American Youth Network, recently hosted a webinar exploring the following question: **How is the digital world shaping young people's lives, well-being and attitudes towards substance use?**

The webinar highlighted the work of the **Inter-American Youth Network**, which brings young people together to exchange experiences, share opportunities and strengthen regional youth voices. Members meet regularly to learn about what is happening across the region, exchange knowledge and ideas, and build partnerships with other organisations and civil society. The Network also organises workshops and activities designed to strengthen youth leadership and participation in substance use prevention.

A series of four webinars are scheduled to explore the connections between **substance use, technology and young people's lives**. Members of the Youth Network are encouraging young people to participate in initiatives where they can share their experiences and help shape future prevention activities.

Key take-aways:

What are algorithms showing us?

One of the key questions raised during the webinar was: **When you open TikTok or Instagram or other social media network, do you decide what you see or does an algorithm decide for you?**

Social media platforms learn from what attracts our attention. The videos we watch, the posts we stop on and the content we interact with all help algorithms decide what to show us next. This can create **echo chambers and filter bubbles**, where people repeatedly see similar content. Over time, certain behaviours, attitudes or ways of coping with stress can begin to feel normal simply because we see them so often.

For young people who may already feel isolated or vulnerable, the online world can become particularly influential. This makes **digital literacy and critical thinking** increasingly important. Algorithms are not going away. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, they are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Prevention therefore needs to evolve alongside technology and help young people understand how digital platforms work and how online content may influence their choices.

Prevention in an AI-driven world

The discussion also highlighted how digital technologies interact with many different areas of our lives – **biological, psychological, social and even spiritual**.

Today, an entire generation is growing up with digital platforms as part of everyday life. These platforms influence how young people communicate, build relationships, access information and understand the world around them.

At the same time, misinformation, highly personalised content and AI-driven recommendation systems present new challenges for prevention.

Families also need support. Screens are becoming part of children's lives from a very early age, while many parents are still learning how to use parental controls, manage screen time and understand the content recommended to their children.

These issues are complex and will be explored further through future ISSUP Youth Network webinars and training activities.

Listening to young people globally

The webinar also introduced the **Global Youth Survey**, an opportunity for young people to share their experiences, perspectives and ideas and help shape future youth initiatives.

One of the key messages from the discussion was clear: **Young people should not simply be the target of prevention programmes, they should be active partners in designing them.**

Get involved

The **ISSUP Youth Network** welcomes young people who want to connect, learn, share their experiences and contribute to prevention activities.

Training sessions, webinars and other opportunities for youth participation will continue to be developed.

Take part in the Global Youth Survey and share your experiences, perspectives and ideas to help shape future youth initiatives:

<https://forms.cloud.microsoft/e/r205x6LaZj>