DIGITAL RESILIENCE
Research Report 2025-2026

TOROA Centre for Communication Research
and Netsafe New Zealand

TOROA

netsafe

Report Information

TOROA Centre for Communication Research: toroaresearch.org
Netsafe New Zealand: netsafe.org.nz

Table of Contents

Summary Statement

Young people's digital lives are shaped by constant connectivity, social visibility and rapid information flows. While online platforms and social media enable essential social connections, provide spaces for identity formation and self-expression, and offer invaluable educational opportunities, harms are now feared to outweigh benefits if unchecked (PHCC, 2025). Media literacy and digital resilience initiatives are widely used to educate young people about online risks. However, there is growing concern that many adult-designed approaches fail to resonate with the realities of young people's experiences of online spaces.

This report presents findings from collaborative participatory research undertaken in partnership between Auckland University of Technology's TOROA Centre for Communication Research and Netsafe New Zealand. The one-month project worked with secondary school students to explore their everyday experiences of online risk, information credibility and digital pressure, and to examine how media literacy messages are received when young people are treated as contributing researchers rather than research subjects. The project combined weekly surveys, focus groups at the beginning and end of the study, and group discussions in which students reviewed and critiqued specifically designed media literacy content.

The study produced several clear findings:

1. Young people experienced online risk primarily as social and peer-based rather than as driven solely by platforms or algorithms. Scams, misinformation and harmful content most often spread through friend networks, group chats and shared spaces, with trust understood as relational rather than technical.

2. Visibility and performance were central to students' online lives. Metrics such as likes, views and follower counts mattered because of what they signalled to peers, influencing decisions about what to post publicly and what to keep private. These pressures were often described as ambient rather than acute, forming part of the background conditions of being online.

3. Encounters with scams and deceptive practices were widely normalised. While many students showed awareness and some practical coping strategies, feedback on the project's media literacy materials highlighted how difficult it is for educational messages to gain attention within everyday social feeds.

4. Students often described platforms as closely monitoring or "listening" to them, reflecting widespread perceptions of surveillance rather than a detailed understanding of data practices. Although this sometimes caused unease, it was largely accepted as the cost of participation.

5. The data pointed to an under-recognised risk of self-blame within dominant online safety framings. When responsibility for harm was placed primarily on individual behaviour, students described safety as a matter of personal vigilance, thereby condoning the roles of platform design, algorithmic amplification and commercial pressures in both amplifying and preventing online harm.

Crucially, the project also revealed why some media literacy approaches fail to resonate. Generic messages, advice that underestimated young people's existing knowledge, overly moralising tones and content that positioned online safety primarily as an individual responsibility were often dismissed by students as obvious, patronising or irrelevant. This disengagement, however, proved analytically valuable: it highlighted a misalignment between adult assumptions and youth realities, creating an opportunity to re-evaluate safety strategies and develop more effective, audience-specific design principles.

The report concludes that media literacy initiatives are more likely to succeed when they:

- Recognise young people as knowledgeable participants and co-researchers
- Address the social nature of online risk
- Are designed iteratively, with space for user-driven critique and revision
- Treat young people's resistance as insight rather than a barrier

These findings have implications for schools, civil society organisations, programme designers, funders and industry stakeholders seeking to support young people's digital resilience in credible, relevant and long-term sustainable ways.

Introduction and Rationale

Media literacy and digital resilience have become central concerns for educators, policymakers and civil society organisations. Young people are often portrayed as particularly vulnerable online, exposed to harmful content, misinformation and social pressures that adults struggle to see or regulate (Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2024; Netsafe, 2020). Although financial scams involving young people as victims are less common than those targeting the elderly, teenagers are significantly more susceptible to violent or sexual content, grooming and cyberbullying (DIA, 2021), which can lead to long-term psychological distress, mental health disorders and self-harm (PHCC, 2025).

At the same time, there is growing evidence that many media literacy initiatives struggle to engage young audiences. Resources designed to educate about online risks and harm prevention are often perceived as generic, repetitive, or disconnected from how digital platforms and peer cultures operate (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Brainbox Institute, 2023). When this happens, well-intentioned interventions risk being ignored or even resisted.

The collaborative TOROA and Netsafe research project began with a simple yet often overlooked premise: young people are experts in their own digital lives. They navigate online environments daily, make ongoing judgements about credibility and trust, and develop informal strategies to manage risk and pressure (Sanders, 2025; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2024). Understanding these practices requires listening directly to young people and taking their accounts seriously.

The research was therefore designed to move beyond one-off consultation or evaluation. Instead, it adopted a participatory, iterative approach that positioned students as proactive contributors whose insights would shape the research design, the data and the subsequent media literacy content under test (Orygen, 2023; Mark & Hagen, 2020). Weekly surveys, early and final focus groups, and group discussions embedded within feedback sessions enabled the research team to trace how young people's views evolved over time and how they responded to different framings of digital risk and responsibility.

By focusing on everyday experiences rather than select or extreme cases, the project sheds light on the ordinary conditions under which digital resilience is practised. The findings reported here are intended to inform harm-prevention strategies, particularly the design of media literacy initiatives that are better aligned with young people's lived realities and more responsive to the social contexts in which online risks circulate.

Background and Aims

Given that online harm costs the New Zealand economy more than $2 billion annually (Netsafe & GASA, 2024) and disproportionately affects young people's wellbeing (PHCC, 2025), this research emerged from growing concern about worsening harm statistics despite the wide availability of online safety initiatives. Research indicates a gap between how adults commonly frame media literacy and how young people experience digital risks (Akello, 2024; Livingstone et al., 2025; Soong et al., 2024). While schools, civil society organisations and industry stakeholders are investing significant effort in digital safety education, feedback from young people often suggests that these initiatives are repetitive, non-specific, overly generalised or misaligned with their everyday online lives (Sanders, 2025; Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2024).

Responding to this gap, TOROA and Netsafe developed a research project centred on young people's daily online habits, risk perceptions and experiences. Rather than starting with predetermined messages or assumptions about what young people need to learn, the research asked adolescents directly about their lived experiences of digital media. This included how they encounter information, how they assess credibility, where they perceive risk and how peer contexts shape their online behaviour.

A further motivation for the research was the recognition that many existing media literacy resources are evaluated primarily by reach or recall, rather than by their resonance with young people or their influence on how they navigate digital spaces (Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, 2024; Bulger & Davison, 2018). This project sought to understand not only *what* young people think about digital risks but also *how* they mitigate these risks when presented with media literacy messages tailored to them.

The overall aim of the project was therefore twofold:

- To generate an evidence-based account of young people's everyday experiences of digital risk, credibility and pressure, expressed in their own language and based on their specific, individual perspectives.

- To examine how media literacy content is received and interpreted when young people are treated as active contributors rather than passive audiences.

By combining these aims, the project positioned media literacy not as a fixed, predetermined set of skills to be transmitted, but as a dynamic, age-specific and socially embedded practice developed through dialogue, iteration, feedback and co-design with the young people for whom it is intended.

Research Focus and Guiding Questions

The project was exploratory in nature and did not begin with hypotheses to be tested. Instead, it was guided by a small set of open research questions designed to remain responsive to participants' experiences as the project unfolded.

The guiding questions were:

- How do young people describe their everyday experiences of digital media, including risk, trust and credibility?

- How do peer relationships and social contexts frame the way online risk is encountered and understood?

- How do young people respond to different forms of media literacy messaging, and what influences whether these messages resonate or are dismissed?

- What can be learned from moments of scepticism, critique or disengagement?

These questions were revisited iteratively throughout the project. Early responses informed the development of media literacy content, which was then tested and discussed with participants. Later stages of the research allowed for reflection on whether and how students' thinking shifted over time.

Importantly, the research focus was not on assessing individual competence or compliance. The project did not seek to measure whether young people could reproduce specific safety messages or demonstrate predefined skills. Instead, it aimed to understand how young people already navigate complex digital environments and how media literacy initiatives might better align with those practices.

Methodological Approach and Research Design

This project was designed as a participatory, youth-centred study, grounded in participatory action research and co-design principles. These methods were selected because the project sought not only to understand young people's experiences of digital media but also to test and refine media literacy responses that were meaningful and usable in real-world school and community contexts.

Participatory action research emphasises collaboration between researchers and key stakeholders in iterative cycles of action and reflection. The knowledge produced by the research is oriented towards practical change rather than detached observation. Rather than positioning participants as mere data sources, participatory approaches treat them as research partners with relevant expertise in their lived environments. In practice, this means that research questions, processes and outputs are shaped through ongoing engagement rather than fixed in advance (Kerrigan et al., 2023).

Closely aligned with participatory research, co-design approaches emphasise working with participants rather than on their behalf, valuing lived experience alongside professional or institutional expertise. Co-design literature shows that one-size-fits-all interventions are often ineffective in education and social change contexts, particularly when they fail to account for local cultures, peer dynamics and everyday practices. Instead, effective co-design involves shared decision-making, attention to power dynamics and iterative development across multiple phases, rather than single or isolated consultations or workshops (Mark & Hagen, 2020; Orygen, 2023).

- Media literacy resources were developed by researchers specialising in digital content creation as short-form, platform-native creative artefacts rather than as standalone educational materials. Each week, the creative team produced content designed to resemble familiar social media genres already circulating in students' feeds, including short-form videos, meme-based images, satirical posts and scam-adjacent scenarios. The intention was not to deliver polished safety messages, but to generate artefacts that could be tested, critiqued, and re-worked through student feedback as part of an iterative co-design process.

- Young people were positioned as active contributors rather than research subjects. Their experiences, language and interpretations of online risk, pressure and credibility were treated as forms of expertise, not as attitudes to be measured or corrected. This stance guided both the data collection and the interpretation of findings.

- **The research was deliberately and intensively iterative.** What students raised in early focus groups and weekly surveys directly informed the media literacy messages developed in response. These materials were then shared with students, who were invited to discuss what worked, what did not, and what felt irrelevant or unconvincing. Rather than treating reactions to any single piece of content as conclusive, the design made it possible to notice patterns over time: what students engaged with, what they questioned and what they quickly forgot. This reflects the action–reflection orientation central to participatory action research, where understanding develops through repeated cycles rather than at a single point in time (Kerrigan et al., 2023).

- **Attention was paid to power, voice and participation.** Co-design research with young people underscores the need to avoid tokenistic involvement and ensure that participation is meaningful rather than symbolic. This meant creating space for disagreement, scepticism and critique, including instances in which young people rejected or disengaged from proposed media literacy messages. These moments were treated as analytically significant rather than as failures of compliance (Mark & Hagen, 2020).

- Finally, the project design recognised that **participatory work is relational and context-dependent.** Engagement took place within the rhythms and constraints of school life, and ethical care was applied when facilitating discussions about risk, harm, online behaviour, and individuals' responses. Rather than aiming for a single definitive intervention, the project prioritised learning what resonates, what misses, and why.

Methods in Practice

This section outlines how the research was carried out in practice. It aims to provide transparency about the process without assuming specialist methodological knowledge.

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

The research was conducted in partnership with a secondary school in New Zealand and ran for one month, involving 13 students across years nine to eleven (aged 13-16). Students were recruited individually and participated on a voluntary basis. They received a small payment for their participation, intended to recognise the value of their time and expertise and to signal that their contributions were important and taken seriously by the research team. Two researchers remained on site at the students' school throughout the research to facilitate close interaction, ongoing dialogue and rapid feedback loops.

Each week during the research, participants completed a short survey. Some parts of the research took place in group settings within the school. These sessions created opportunities for shared discussion and collective reflection, enabling students to respond to each other's ideas and to situate their individual experiences within broader peer norms and practices. This combination of individual and group-based engagement aligned with the project's participatory aims.

DATA SOURCES

Multiple forms of qualitative data were collected throughout the life of the project. These included:

- Focus group discussions conducted at the beginning of the research, which explored students' everyday experiences of digital media, online risks and trust

- Weekly surveys completed by individual students, allowing the research team to track students' online experiences, perceptions and responses across successive weeks

- Short self-filmed video responses recorded by students while viewing media literacy resources and prior to group discussion, capturing individual, in-the-moment reactions

- Group discussions conducted during sessions where media literacy resources were shared and reviewed, enabling collective reflection on what resonated, what felt irrelevant, and what missed the mark

- Focus group discussions at the conclusion of the project, which provided an opportunity for students to reflect on the process as a whole and on any changes in thinking or awareness

Student feedback on media literacy resources was gathered through individual self-recorded responses and collective discussions, while weekly surveys captured students' ongoing online experiences. These data sources were intentionally integrated rather than treated as separate strands, enabling comparisons between early expectations and later reflections and an examination of how students' views developed throughout the project.

ITERATION AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

A key feature of the research was its iterative structure. In practice, this involved a weekly cycle in which emerging themes from surveys and discussions informed the selection of both topic and genre. Decisions were made not only about what issue to address (e.g. scams, impersonation, algorithmic exposure), but about how it should be rendered: for example, as a meme, a short video, a satirical post or a deliberately ambiguous scenario. Students then reviewed these artefacts collectively, discussing whether they were age-appropriate, authentic, memorable, confusing or likely to be ignored in a real scrolling context. These discussions formed a central component of the qualitative data.

A key feature of the project was its iterative structure, which meant that students' responses were revisited and reconsidered over time rather than treated as one-off reactions. This process allowed the research team to observe not only initial reactions, but also how students' views evolved as they encountered different framings of online risk, credibility and responsibility. Moments of disengagement, scepticism or rejection were treated as analytically significant, offering insight into why certain approaches failed to resonate.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

All qualitative data points were analysed using a thematic approach. Survey responses and notes from focus groups and group discussions were read and re-read to identify recurring patterns, points of difference and areas of strong agreement or disagreement across participants and over time.

Themes were developed inductively, emerging from the data rather than assumed in advance. Particular attention was paid to the language young people used to describe their online experiences, including how they explained risk, trust, perceived pressures and responsibility in their own terms.

Data interpretation was informed by comparisons across data sources and over time. Emerging themes were checked against feedback gathered in subsequent sessions, helping to ensure that the analysis reflected young people's perspectives rather than researcher or adult-centric assumptions.

ETHICAL CARE AND REFLEXIVITY

Working with young people on issues related to online risks and harm requires particular care. Surveys and discussions were designed to avoid prompting personal disclosure unless students chose to share. The emphasis was on everyday experiences and shared patterns rather than individual incidents.

The research was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC 24/338) and conducted with attention to the power dynamics inherent in school-based research and in adult–youth interactions. Ongoing reflexive discussion was used to consider how adult perspectives, institutional settings and research objectives might shape what students felt able to say, and how their contributions were interpreted and represented.

What Young People Told Us: Key Findings

Across the focus groups and weekly surveys, young people described online risks as emerging from familiar, everyday digital environments rather than from deliberate searches or direct interactions with unknown users, sites or sources. Issues such as scams, rumours and harmful or misleading content were most often reported to have appeared incidentally while scrolling through feeds, or, in the case of rumours and harassment, within group chats.

Students' accounts emphasised the social contexts in which risk emerged. Deceptive or harmful content was often encountered in shared spaces and framed in ways that relied on social familiarity or emotional response. As one student described, *"If you don't subscribe, a big spider will be on your pillow tonight… my youngest brother saw this and believed it and cried, not knowing how to subscribe"*.

Others spoke about confusion and distress arising from content encountered in shared online spaces rather than through active searching. One student described feeling unsettled by content they did not understand, noting that *"the lady's video made me a bit confused because they didn't do anything wrong and how persistent she was in trying to harm him"*. Harm was also described as arising from peer interaction, with students reporting about peers *"making fun of others"* and that content circulated through comments and group discussions.

Risk was therefore experienced as circulating laterally through socially networked environments rather than being encountered through active searching or framed by students primarily in algorithmic terms. While algorithmic systems shape what appears in social feeds, students more often described risk as emerging in familiar social settings, including group chats and shared feeds. This complicates common adult assumptions that young people experience online harm chiefly as the result of platform algorithms or anonymous strangers. Instead, many students located responsibility in their own behaviour—such as scrolling or engagement—reflecting a tendency towards self-blame even when exposure was algorithmically amplified.

VISIBILITY, PERFORMANCE AND SOCIAL PRESSURE

Students frequently described public-facing social media spaces as highly visible and readily judged, where content was quickly assessed and just as quickly dismissed. In these environments, disengagement was often described as habitual and automatic, particularly in relation to scrolling behaviour. Analytically, this can be understood as part of a broader attention economy in which content is rapidly evaluated and discarded, though students did not explicitly frame it in terms of audience judgment.

This pressure was not always articulated as overt anxiety, but it was often described as a background expectation: content had to look and sound right and fit established norms. Students distinguished between public-facing content, which was treated as exposed, easily dismissed or skippable, and private messaging spaces, which were framed as routine and relational, where reputational stakes were tied to maintaining interpersonal connection rather than to public evaluation or visibility.

Importantly, these dynamics were discussed in social rather than technical terms. When metrics such as likes or views were mentioned, they were framed as signs of attention or peer recognition. For example, students referred to people who would *"do dumb stuff for likes"*, using this language to describe social pressure rather than numerical comparison or strategic self-branding.

SCAMS AND DECEPTIVE PRACTICES AS EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

Scams, fake sellers and impersonation were commonly reported, particularly on social media platforms where advertising and personal content blend. Students reported difficulty distinguishing legitimate from fraudulent sellers when deceptive content was embedded within familiar platform aesthetics. These uncertainties extended beyond commercial transactions to include content that mimicked everyday or charitable activity. As one Year 9 student explained:

"People pretending to be homeless online or making videos pretending to be homeless which I think is annoying and it worries me because I don't know if they are really homeless or not and other people could think the same and then we don't really know whats real and whats fake."

Similar uncertainty was evident in students' accounts of online shopping encounters. A Year 9 student described attempting to purchase a product that appeared local and legitimate, but later raised concerns about its authenticity:

"We tried to order a dog tag for my dog and it said it was a New Zealand website and would arrive in 3 to 4 days. It turned out that it was an online company from somewhere overseas and would take a few months to arrive. It was a little stressful as it could've been a scam website but we did not know."

Impersonation scams were also frequently mentioned, particularly those that relied on familiar relational cues to prompt a response. One student described repeated attempts to impersonate a family member: *"My family keeps getting messages of people pretending to be a family member saying things like 'hey mum I lost my phone and sim card and are texting off my friends phone' waiting for them to reply to scam them."*

Rather than framing these encounters as exceptional or unusual, students often treated scams as a routine feature of online life. This was evident in the way scam detection was described as an expected part of everyday digital practice. As another student observed, *"if you go to most online shops, most people check if it's a scam"*.

This normalisation points to a form of everyday digital resilience, in which students anticipate and attempt to manage exposure to deceptive content as part of routine online participation. At the same time, it highlights the limits of current protective strategies, particularly when scams and impersonation are seamlessly embedded within social feeds that mirror ordinary social and commercial content.

PRIVACY BELIEFS AND THE SENSE OF BEING WATCHED

Students frequently reported believing that platforms were closely tracking their behaviour, often phrased as apps 'listening' to conversations. This belief was commonly grounded in everyday experiences in which advertising appeared to align closely with recent spoken interactions within the household, rather than with deliberate searches. As one student explained, *"People think apps can hear you because Dad wanted a pop-up sprinkler and all that was turning up on Temu was pop-up sprinklers"*.

Another described a similar experience following a family conversation: *"I talked about it aloud, and now on Insta and FB every fourth ad is about the Huski cups... Meta is spying on me."*

Students varied in how these perceptions were framed. For some, surveillance was normalised and accepted as part of participating in digital spaces, even when it was recognised as intrusive. Others expressed discomfort or unease but felt that opting out was unrealistic given the centrality of platforms to social connection, entertainment and everyday communication.

Rather than prompting disengagement, surveillance was often normalised as a condition of digital life. Students increasingly felt that their online activity—and, as they perceived it, even offline conversations—could influence what they encountered online, yet this did not consistently translate into feelings of control or meaningful action. Instead, surveillance was framed as something to be lived with rather than resisted or negotiated.

WHERE MEDIA LITERACY MESSAGES RESONATED — AND WHERE NOT

Students' responses to the tailored media literacy content were mixed. Despite this variation, clear patterns emerged in how young people engage with safety and credibility messages. Content closely aligned with students' lived experiences—particularly material reflecting peer dynamics, everyday online demands and expectations, and familiar platform practices—was more likely to be taken seriously. When media literacy messages felt recognisable, timely and grounded in how students encounter online risk, they were more likely to prompt discussion or reflection.

By contrast, messages that felt generic, overly cautionary or culturally misaligned were often dismissed quickly. In group discussions, students were highly attuned to whether media literacy was designed for them or for adults. As one student put it, *"It feels like my parents just trying to say some teenage lingo", "I'd just look at it and move on"*. These responses did not reflect rejection of media literacy as a concept, but rather resistance to messages that failed to acknowledge students' existing knowledge or the social realities of their online lives.

Crucially, disengagement proved analytically meaningful. When students ignored, critiqued or rejected content, these moments revealed specific mismatches between adult intentions and youth experience. Rather than signalling apathy, disengagement highlighted where tone, assumptions or framing failed to resonate.

What Didn't Land — And Why

Understanding where media literacy approaches failed to connect with young audiences was among the project's most valuable outcomes. Moments of scepticism, dismissal or disengagement offered insight into how young people interpret media literacy messages and why well-intentioned interventions often miss their mark. Rather than rejecting media literacy outright, students consistently engaged in evaluative judgement, assessing whether messages felt credible and grounded in their lived experience. Where they did not, students articulated clear reasons why certain content felt irrelevant, unconvincing or easy to ignore.

GENERIC MESSAGES FEEL DISCONNECTED FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

Students were quick to identify media literacy messages that felt abstract, overly general or detached from how platforms function in their everyday lives. Literacy learning built around broad warnings or simplified scenarios was often dismissed as unrealistic. As one student noted during content feedback, *"It's like… you'd get the message, but it's just expected"*.

Young people contrasted these messages with their own experiences, emphasising that online risks rarely present themselves in neat or obvious forms. When media literacy content failed to reflect the speed, ambiguity and social embeddedness of online interactions, students struggled to recognise its relevance. This suggests that familiarity with platforms does not reduce risk but rather raises expectations of credibility. Media literacy messages that did not 'sound right' were less likely to be taken seriously, regardless of visual appeal or intent.

ADVICE THAT UNDERESTIMATES YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

Students often reacted negatively to media literacy initiatives that repeated information they already knew or offered little new insight. This was evident from the first week of content feedback, when several participants expressed frustration at being given advice that assumed a lack of prior knowledge. As one student commented, *"Like, duh, this is known and understood"*.

Importantly, this feedback was raised early in the project and taken on board by the research team. It informed subsequent iterations of media literacy learning, reinforcing the need to avoid assuming that young people do not already know what is involved and to recognise them as experienced users navigating familiar online risks. In this context, messages positioning young people as novices were more likely to be dismissed, undermining the intervention's credibility.

OVEREMPHASIS ON INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Another point of resistance emerged around media literacy messages that framed online safety primarily as a matter of individual vigilance. Advice centred on personal caution or careful decision-making often assumed a level of attention and control that did not align with how students described their everyday media use. As students explained, *"Most people, when they're scrolling through short-form content, scroll mindlessly and aren't paying that much attention"*— *"You don't remember basically anything from when you're scrolling"*.

Students emphasised that many online risks stem from peer networks, shared content or platform dynamics rather than deliberate individual actions. In these situations, harm was often seen as incidental rather than intentional.

Rather than rejecting personal responsibility outright, students pointed to its limits. Several noted that constant vigilance was unrealistic in fast-moving, highly mediated environments, where attention is fragmented and content is encountered passively. Media literacy messages that failed to reflect the complex conditions in which online risk is encountered were more likely to be rejected than those that acknowledged multi-agent responsibilities.

TONE MATTERED AS MUCH AS CONTENT

Students were highly attuned to tone. Media literacy messages that felt alarmist, moralising or overly instructional were more likely to be dismissed, even when the information was accurate. Several students described certain materials as feeling like *"ads"* or *"something for Facebook"*, indicating a sense of distance from their everyday digital environments.

By contrast, content that adopted a conversational tone or reflected students' own language was more likely to prompt discussion. Tone served as a signal of distance and alignment: messages that sounded like they came from outsiders or authority figures were less likely to be taken seriously than those grounded in lived experience.

DISENGAGEMENT AS A SOURCE OF INSIGHT

Rather than treating disengagement as a failure, the research regarded moments of resistance as analytically productive. When students ignored, criticised or rejected content, these responses revealed specific misalignments between adult-designed interventions and youth realities.

In several cases, what did not land pointed directly to what needed to change: greater specificity, clearer acknowledgement of peer dynamics, and recognition of young people as already knowledgeable participants. Seen in this light, disengagement became a diagnostic signal, reinforcing the value of participatory and iterative approaches that allowed media literacy content to be tested, questioned and revised in dialogue with the young people it was intended to serve.

Implications for Practice

Although this was a relatively short exploratory research project, the findings point to several considerations for those designing and delivering media literacy and digital resilience initiatives for young people. Rather than identifying a single best approach, the data highlight recurring patterns in how young people engage with messages about online risks, credibility and safety.

One clear implication is the need to recognise that young people already possess substantial digital knowledge and experience. Media literacy initiatives that assume students lack awareness are more likely to be met with disengagement or scepticism. Participants responded more positively when discussions were framed as opportunities for shared exploration, when their own examples and language were taken seriously, and when uncertainty and complexity were acknowledged rather than reduced to fixed rules.

The findings also underscore the central role of peer dynamics. Young people described online risk as circulating socially through group chats and shared content, rather than as a series of isolated, individual decisions. Approaches that focus narrowly on personal responsibility risk overlooking these social dimensions. Creating spaces for collective discussion, whether in classrooms or youth settings, may help young people articulate and compare their experiences of what to believe and how to recognise social pressures and harmful content, rather than navigating these issues alone.

For organisations developing media literacy resources, the project highlights the value of participatory and iterative design. Students were most engaged when content reflected the realities of their online lives and when feedback, especially critique or resistance, was treated as meaningful input rather than a barrier. Testing messages with the intended audience and allowing time for revision helped identify misalignments early and improve relevance.

Finally, the data suggest that awareness-raising alone has limits. The normalisation of scams, impersonation and surveillance beliefs indicates that young people are often already aware of online risks but feel constrained in their ability to avoid them. Supporting discussion about everyday coping strategies, ambiguity and the boundaries of individual control may be more productive than focusing solely on prevention or avoidance.

Conclusion

This research advances understanding of the social nature of online risk. Across the data, issues such as misinformation, scams and harmful content were experienced predominantly through peer networks and shared spaces rather than as isolated individual encounters. It became evident that online risks are not confined to digital interactions but extend into shared physical spaces. This finding challenges media literacy approaches that focus narrowly on individual online behaviour or abstract platform features.

This finding is further supported by the recognition that young online users often perceive fault in their own behaviour or a lack of mitigating skills when encountering harmful content. Media literacy education that focuses on awareness campaigns and self-protection strategies can reinforce victim-blaming rather than offer more systemic solutions.

The research also demonstrates the value of participatory and iterative design. By engaging young people in ongoing feedback and treating disengagement as meaningful data, the research identified where adult assumptions diverged from young people's experiences. In doing so, it offers a practical example of how youth-centred research can generate findings directly usable by those designing and delivering media literacy initiatives.

Taken together, the findings highlight the value of flexible, dialogue-based digital resilience approaches that treat young people as knowledgeable participants rather than research subjects. Even in a short pilot study such as this one, the findings show that attention to tone, context and lived experience can determine whether media literacy messages are positively received or dismissed as irrelevant, patronising or lame.

Next Steps

The findings of this research point to several possible next steps for research, practice, and collaboration.

One clear priority is to keep developing and testing media literacy resources that reflect peer dynamics, everyday uncertainty and how risk actually circulates socially. Building on the iterative approach used in this project, future work could involve longer-term research and adaptation across diverse school and community settings, while recognising that online harm extends into offline everyday environments.

There is also scope to deepen partnerships among schools, civil society organisations and industry stakeholders. Young people's accounts indicate that effective digital resilience cannot be achieved through education alone and requires coordination among multiple actors in the digital ecosystem.

Finally, the research outcomes highlight the value of sustained engagement with young people. Future research could examine how digital resilience develops over the long term across age groups, platforms and contexts, and how young people's strategies evolve as digital environments change.

References

Akello, T. (2024). Digital literacy and media consumption among different age groups. *Journal of Communication, 5*(2), 14-27.

Bulger, M., & Davison, P. (2018). The promises, challenges, and futures of media literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education, 10*(1), 1–21.

Brainbox Institute. (2023). *Deciphering Media Literacy: Charting the future in Aotearoa.* Brainbox Institute.

DIA (2021). *Child safety online.* Department of Internal Affairs | Te Tari Taiwhenua. https://www.dia.govt.nz/Digital-Child-Exploitation-Child-Safety-Online

Kerrigan, V., Park, D., Ross, C., Herdman, R. M., Wilson, P. M., Kerrigan, V., Gunabarra, C., Tinapple, W., Burrunali, J., Nganjmirra, J., Ralph, A. P., & Davies, J. (2023). Countering the "wrong story": A participatory action research approach to developing COVID-19 vaccine information videos with First Nations leaders in Australia. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications, 10*(1), Article 19. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-01965-8

Livingstone, S., Jessen, R. S., Stoilova, M., Stänicke, L. I., Graham, R., Staksrud, E., & Jensen, T. (2025). Can platform literacy protect vulnerable young people against the risky affordances of social media platforms? *Information, Communication & Society,* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2518254

McKercher, K.A. (2020). *Beyond Sticky Notes: Co-Design for real.* Thorpe-Bowker.

Mark, S & Hagen, P (2020). *Co-design in Aotearoa New Zealand: a snapshot of the literature.* Auckland Council.

Netsafe. (2020, August 20). *Survey reveals at least 50% of Kiwis have experienced fake news.*

https://resource.netsafe.org.nz/MR-Netsafe-Fake-News-survey-results.pdf

Netsafe & GASA (2024). *The state of scams in New Zealand 2024.* https://resource.netsafe.org.nz/State-of-Scams-Report-New-Zealand---2024-Final.pdf https://cdn.sanity.io/files/8y8wsx0z/production/eb3da5d9a6357af9254e3a76a31451b5b5583aa0.pdf

Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (2024). *He Uru Kahikatea: Building young people's resilience through media and information literacy and digital citizenship skills - Full report.* Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Orygen (2023). *Co-designing with young people: The fundamentals.* The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health.

PHCC (2025, 25 July). *Evidence supports the need to protect adolescents from social media harm.* Public Health Communication Centre Aotearoa. https://www.phcc.org.nz/briefing/evidence-supports-need-protect-adolescents-social-media-harms

Sanders, K. (2025). *Beyond a single story: Understanding young people's digital experiences.* Netsafe.

Soong, H., Nichols, S., Dooley, K., & Neumann, M. M. (2025). Contesting the framing of digital risk: An analysis of Australian children's experiences. *Journal of Children and Media, 19*(1), 175–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2024.2402271