

Editorial

Shifting from Protection to Empowerment: Resilience-Based Approaches for Youth Digital Well-Being and Safety

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In our increasingly digitized world, youth are not merely passive consumers of technology. They are active agents navigating complex online ecosystems. Traditional approaches to youth online safety have largely emphasized protectionist tactics, namely parental control apps, surveillance systems, age restrictions, and AI-based risk flagging. While well-intended, these strategies are often shaped through a paternalistic lens that centers youth as vulnerable, uninformed, and in need of protection. Such methods can compromise their autonomy, privacy, and the parent–child trust that is critical for development. More recently, a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship has started to recognize the need for a paradigm shift, one that emphasizes digital resilience, youth agency, and social–ecological support systems.

This Special Issue, “Resilience-Based Approaches for Promoting Digital Well-Being and Safety of Youth,” emerged in response to this critical gap. Our goal was to spotlight research that moves beyond fear-driven and restrictive approaches toward strength-based interventions that empower youth to manage online risks meaningfully. Across the articles featured in this Special Issue, a unifying theme is the imperative to move beyond punitive or deficit-based models and instead foster digital resilience in youth through proactive, supportive, and contextually informed interventions. Each contribution emphasizes the importance of empowering young people, whether through structured frameworks like Problem recognition, Reaching out, Organizing support, Training, Engaging experts, Continuous support, and Tackling safety measures (PROTECT) and Pause, Reflect, and Redirect (PRR), peer-informed information practices, or parent–child collaboration, to navigate online risks with greater agency and skill. Rather than focusing solely on risk avoidance, the articles advocate for trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate, and socially attuned approaches that equip youth to make thoughtful decisions, build coping strategies, and seek out supportive networks. From addressing technology-facilitated abuse to countering cyber sextortion, and from enhancing digital literacy to leveraging family dynamics, the collection collectively underscores the need for interdisciplinary, resilience-based strategies that center youth perspectives and adapt to their lived digital realities.

Several papers in this issue advance new conceptual frameworks grounded in youth empowerment and support systems. For example, the PROTECT framework, developed by **Diana Freed (Brown University)** and colleagues, introduces a structured, trauma-informed approach to help adults support youth facing technology-facilitated abuse. It bridges insights from social support theory and digital safety research to guide educators, advocates, and developers toward meaningful, context-sensitive interventions. Similarly, the Pause, Reflect, and Redirect (PRR) framework, proposed by **Elizabeth A. Sweigart (Vanderbilt University)** and colleagues, takes a developmental and human-centered approach to online



Received: 9 July 2025

Accepted: 9 July 2025

Published: 14 July 2025

Citation: Wisniewski, Pamela, and Jinkyung Katie Park. 2025. Shifting from Protection to Empowerment: Resilience-Based Approaches for Youth Digital Well-Being and Safety. *Social Sciences* 14: 432. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14070432>

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decision-making, offering youth space to make mistakes, reflect, and reorient their choices, an important departure from punitive models.

Other contributions challenge existing assumptions about digital literacy by highlighting how youth already exercise “information sensibility” through peer-based evaluation and identity-driven engagement with online content. This ethnographic study by **Amelia Hassoun (University of Cambridge)** and colleagues reframes resilience as socially distributed and culturally grounded, proposing peer-to-peer, community-based strategies to support youth in managing misinformation, health content, and other online risks.

Extending beyond individual youth, one paper by **John P. Ziker (Boise State University)** centers on the parent–child dynamic, exploring how U.S. parents adaptively respond to their children’s digital exposure. By integrating evolutionary theory and participatory co-design, the authors reveal that many parents seek tools that encourage skill-building and dialog, rather than rigid control. This reinforces the broader theme of this issue: digital resilience emerges not from restriction, but from supportive, dialogic relationships.

Lastly, the issue includes a bibliometric review of the evolving cyber sextortion research landscape authored by **Fani M. Radebe and Kennedy Njenga (University of Johannesburg)**, a timely contribution that maps out where the field has been and where it is headed. This paper identifies a need for resilience- and autonomy-based responses to cyber sextortion and calls for stronger scholarly participation from underrepresented regions, particularly in Africa.

Together, the papers in this Special Issue demonstrate a collective reimagining of youth digital safety, not as a matter of shielding or limiting youth, but as a challenge of equipping them with the tools, support, and agency to thrive online. However, this is only the beginning. We see several promising avenues for future research:

- **Measuring resilience and outcomes:** The field would benefit from validated measures of digital resilience and longitudinal studies that examine how interventions impact youth outcomes over time.
- **Contextualizing resilience:** The digital experiences and online risks of youth digital experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, regional, identity, disability, and socioeconomic status. Future research should explore how digital resilience manifests across diverse contexts and prioritize the design of culturally and socially responsive interventions.
- **Participatory design with youth:** Adolescents must be meaningfully involved in shaping the systems and tools designed for their safety. Future research is needed to expand participatory design methods that center youth voices.
- **AI and emerging technologies:** As AI and algorithmic systems play an increasing role in moderating and mediating online experiences, researchers must examine how to make these systems transparent, trustworthy, and responsive to youth needs.

We hope this Special Issue inspires researchers, designers, educators, and policymakers to embrace a more empowering vision of youth digital well-being, one that positions youth not as passive recipients of protection but as active agents of their own safety and thriving. We invite readers to explore the thoughtful contributions within this issue and to join us in charting the next wave of resilience-based research and practice.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

List of Contributions:

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5. Ziker, John P., Jerry Alan Fails, Kendall House, Jessi Boyer, Michael Wendell, Hollie Abele, Letizia Maukar, and Kayla Ramirez. 2025. Parent–Child Adaptive Responses for Digital Resilience. *Social Science* 14: 197. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14040197>.

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