

Through Their Eyes: Insights from a Youth-Led Online Safety Survey

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Introduction

The digital revolution has significantly transformed the lives of children and youth across the globe. In Malawi, the advent of widespread internet access has brought about remarkable changes in how children and youths access education, engage socially, and consume information. While digital technologies offer valuable opportunities for academic enrichment and social interaction, they also expose children and youths to significant risks, including cyberbullying, online grooming, exposure to harmful content, and privacy violations.

The Church and Society Programme (CSP) of the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, through a Children, Youth and Communities for Change (CYCC) project (2018-2029), funded by Transform Aid International, recognized the growing influence of the digital space on child development and therefore launched a survey in five Traditional Authorities of Mwamlowe, Chapinduka and Mwalweni in Rumphi district and Traditional Authority Wasambo in Karonga district, in Northern Malawi. The primary objectives was to understand children's internet usage patterns, identify the challenges they encounter online, assess the impact of the internet on their education, and recommend strategies for safeguarding children in cyberspace.

This report, titled ***Through Their Eyes*** provides **Insights from a Youth-Led Online Safety Survey**, examining the interplay between internet use and child safety. The insights gathered are not only vital for stakeholders working in child protection and digital policy but also for educators, parents, and law enforcement officials. More importantly, the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority who recently launched the Child Online Protection Initiative on 7th February, 2025. CSP recognizes that these stakeholders are integral in creating a safer digital environment for Malawi's youth and children.

Legal and Policy Context

Malawi's legal framework for child protection in digital spaces is anchored in two major legislations: the **Child Care, Protection and Justice Act (2010)** and the **Electronic Transactions and Cybersecurity Act (2016)**. The former addresses crimes such as child pornography, child trafficking, and abuse, while the latter focuses on combating cybercrime, including offenses like cyberbullying, identity theft, and digital exploitation of minors. These laws establish a solid foundation for online child

protection, but face practical enforcement challenges due to gaps in digital literacy among law enforcement agencies and the general population.

The Malawi government's commitment to child online safety was reaffirmed in 2025 through the launch of the Child Online Protection (COP) Initiative by the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA). First Lady Monica Chakwera, serving as the initiative's ambassador, emphasized the urgency of collaborative action involving families, schools, civil society organizations, and regulatory bodies. The initiative aims to raise awareness, promote responsible digital citizenship, and implement robust safety measures tailored to the Malawian context.

Despite the aforementioned developments, the implementation of child protection laws remains hindered by poor infrastructure and limited technical capacity. Rural districts like Rumphu and Karonga, particularly those visited under this survey, have not been a priority for the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA). Instead, MACRA, has focused more on urban initiatives such as public Wi-Fi hotspots. This digital divide deepens existing inequalities, limiting access to protective services and digital literacy programs for children and youth. Many residents are also unaware of legal channels for reporting cybercrimes involving minors, weakening child protection efforts in these areas

Methodology and Demographic Overview

The survey was conducted by 21 youth interviewers utilizing an online questionnaire developed through Google Forms. Reflecting the survey's title, *Through Their Eyes*, the research was led by young people who engaged their peers—fellow youth and children—as respondents. The interviewers were strategically selected from the target communities across Rumphu and Karonga districts.

All participating youth interviewers had previously completed a one-week training in 2024 under the CYCC project, which covered key aspects of community mobilization, research design, data collection tools, and basic data analysis. In addition to their regular involvement in bi-annual project monitoring activities, they worked closely with the CSP team in designing the structured questionnaire and managing its digital deployment. Their experience and training ensured they were well-prepared to execute this assignment effectively and professionally.

A total of 111 questionnaires were administered. Since the survey aimed to capture perspectives from youths and children, the sample was purposively targeted toward this demographic. Respondents were randomly selected within the vicinity of each interviewer to ensure a diverse cross-section of the population in terms of age, gender, educational background, and disability status. Each interviewer was assigned a maximum of five respondents.

The exercise employed quantitative methods to facilitate comprehensive data collection and to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences of children and youth in the digital space. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Age distribution among the respondents showed that 13 percent were under the age of nine, 31 percent were between 10 and 15, and 9 percent were aged 16 to 18. The

most represented age group, comprising 34 percent, fell between 19 and 24 years, while 13 percent were between 25 and 30 years. This spread allowed for the inclusion of both school-aged children and young adults, many of whom act as caregivers or role models for younger children in their communities.

The gender balance in the survey was commendable, with males making up 53 percent of respondents and females accounting for 47 percent. This near-equal representation ensured that the findings captured gender-specific nuances in online behavior and exposure to digital risks. Additionally, 6 percent of participants reported living with a disability, providing important insights into the intersection of disability and digital access.

In terms of educational attainment, the respondents were distributed across various levels. About 9.9 percent were in Standard 1 to 5, 26.1 percent in Standard 5 to 8, and 14.4 percent in Form 1 to 2. Those in Form 3 to 4 represented 23.4 percent, while 2.7 percent were attending university or college. A notable 23.4 percent were out of school, a category that includes dropouts and young adults who may have aged out of the formal education system.

Internet Access and Device Ownership

Internet access among respondents was moderate, with 60 percent indicating that they have ever used the internet, while 40 percent have not. The digital divide remains stark, particularly between urban and rural settings, with access often limited by cost, connectivity, and availability of digital devices. The predominance of mobile phones as the primary access point to the internet is reflected in the data, with 61.3 percent of internet users relying on their mobile phones. Only 3.6 percent used their computers, while 35.1 percent had no access to a device of their own.

These findings highlight the critical role that mobile technology plays in bridging the digital gap in Malawi. However, they also raise concerns about the quality of access, as mobile phones, especially low-end models, may not support advanced educational applications or safety features. Furthermore, the lack of device ownership among a significant portion of the respondents limits their ability to benefit from digital learning platforms and online safety tools.

Online Behavior and Social Media Usage

The survey found significant variation in social media engagement among respondents. Approximately 40.5 percent reported not using any social media platform. Among those who did, Facebook was the most commonly used, with 37.8 percent of respondents indicating it as their primary platform. WhatsApp followed at 18.9 percent, while 2.7 percent used TikTok. The popularity of Facebook and WhatsApp aligns with broader trends in Malawi, where these platforms are widely accessible and affordable due to data bundle promotions offered by Telekom Networks Malawi Limited and Airtel mobile network providers.

One of the most concerning findings was that 39 percent of children admitted to interacting with strangers online. Such interactions increase the risk of exposure to online predators, scams, and manipulation. Alarming, 6.3 percent of respondents reported being asked to send sexually explicit images, and 4.5 percent admitted to

complying. Although the figure is low, these statistics underscore the urgent need for comprehensive digital education and the establishment of safe online practices.

Challenges Encountered Online

This survey found that youths and children face a wide range of challenges in the digital space, many of which go unreported due to fear, shame, or lack of knowledge about reporting mechanisms. In the survey, 45.9 percent of respondents acknowledged encountering problems online. Another 36 percent were unsure, suggesting either a lack of awareness about what constitutes a problem or a reluctance to disclose sensitive information.

The most frequently reported issues included deception (23.4 percent), insults (16.2 percent), and misleading content or fake news (12.6 percent). A smaller number of respondents experienced hacking (9 percent), scams (1.8 percent), or reported no issues at all (45 percent). The variety of challenges encountered demonstrates the multifaceted nature of online threats and the need for equally comprehensive solutions. In the face of these challenges, no child or youth reported them to the police or any institution, highlighting the persistent lack of reporting even in the presence of a legal framework in the country.

Pornographic exposure emerged as a significant concern in the study, with 61.3 percent of respondents reporting that they had heard of peers watching such content. This figure is notably high, particularly given the psychological effects that pornographic material can have on children and youth. Considering the cultural sensitivity surrounding this topic in Malawian society, the actual prevalence is likely underreported. Furthermore, 19.8 percent of respondents admitted to having watched pornography themselves. These findings indicate that children are increasingly exposed to content that may negatively influence their understanding of relationships and sexuality. Such exposure could be a contributing factor to the rising incidences of early marriages and teenage pregnancies reported across the four Traditional Authorities surveyed—trends that have led to high numbers of early school dropouts.

Educational Impact of Internet Use

Despite the negative side of internet usage being established, the survey sought to understand how youth and children utilize the internet for educational purposes and the extent to which it supports their academic development. When asked whether the internet helped them academically, 45.9 percent responded affirmatively, while 45.5 percent were uncertain. Only 4.5 percent believed the internet did not help them academically. This near-equal split between users who benefited and those who were unsure suggests that many children are not fully leveraging the internet's educational potential.

Among those who used the internet for learning, 36.9 percent accessed digital books, 6.3 percent viewed educational pictures, and 1.8 percent used calculators. However, a significant 29.7 percent did not know how to properly use the internet for academic purposes, while 17.1 percent used it primarily for entertainment. Another

8.1 percent reported doing nothing significant online, pointing to a lack of structured digital engagement.

Barriers to effective educational use included poor digital literacy (53.2 percent), perceived as a distraction from studies (14.4 percent), and access to inappropriate content (19.8 percent) when they go online, i.e. pop up adverts that ultimately cox them to other sites. These findings underscore the importance of integrating digital education into school curricula and providing children with the tools and guidance needed to navigate online spaces safely and productively.

Gender-Specific Vulnerabilities and Broader Risks

The survey findings revealed that girls are disproportionately affected by certain online risks. These include cyber harassment, sextortion, and online blackmail, which are often targeted at female users. The situation is exacerbated in rural areas like the ones surveyed, where limited access to support services and societal taboos around discussing sexuality and abuse prevent many victims from seeking help. Gender-based digital violence is an emerging threat that requires urgent attention.

The findings of this study reaffirm that strong parental involvement plays a critical role in mitigating the risks associated with children's online activities. Parents who actively engage by setting clear digital boundaries, using parental control tools, and maintaining open lines of communication can significantly reduce their children's exposure to harmful content and online threats. Furthermore, empowering children with critical thinking skills and digital resilience can decrease their susceptibility to online scams and cyberbullying. This, however, assumes that parents are digitally literate. However, when preliminary findings were presented to 200 parents across the four targeted Traditional Authorities, 98% reported lacking the digital literacy required to implement effective online safety measures. This, therefore, highlights a significant gap in parental capacity and underscores the urgent need for increased awareness and targeted interventions to strengthen digital child safeguarding practices in the surveyed areas.

Recommendations

Based on the survey findings, several actionable recommendations can be proposed. Firstly, Malawi should prioritize the development and implementation of digital literacy programs tailored to children, parents, and educators. These programs should address not only technical competencies but also promote ethical and safe online behavior. Institutions such as the Church and Society Programme of the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia could play a pivotal role in this effort, leveraging both their faith-based foundation and extensive experience in community engagement. These programs are urgent considering the limited awareness levels among the citizens on the new Electronic Transactions and Cybersecurity Act (2016) and the growing online abuses and threats.

Secondly, parental involvement should be strengthened through community outreach and training programs that equip parents and other caregivers with the necessary tools to monitor and guide their children's digital activities. Schools must also be adequately resourced to support digital education and respond effectively to cyber-

related incidents. Equally important is the need to review and update the Life Skills curriculum in primary schools and similar subjects at secondary school level to incorporate digital safety, including responsible and safe use of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI). Thus, procurement of phones, tablets, just like textbooks, should be encouraged at both primary and secondary school levels.

Thirdly, promoting the constructive use of the internet, especially for academic and creative pursuits, can help redirect children away from harmful content. Educational platforms should be made more accessible, particularly in rural areas, through partnerships with telecommunications providers and the government. Edutainment applications can be developed by local Universities and vetted by the government and distributed to parents across the country.

Fourthly, there is an urgent need to establish safe and accessible reporting channels for children and youth who experience online abuse and threats. These channels must be child-friendly, confidential, and directly linked to support services such as counseling and legal assistance. The Legal Aid Bureau, for example, must enhance its efforts in providing legal support to safeguard the rights of children and youth who face human rights violations and abuse in digital spaces.

Lastly, law enforcement agencies must receive specialized training in cybercrime investigation and child protection. This includes building capacity for digital forensics and enhancing coordination with international cybercrime units. This is in addition to ensuring that law enforcement agencies know how to handle and deal with such reports without necessarily trivializing them.

Conclusion

Through Their Eyes: Insights from a Youth-Led Online Safety Survey offers a compelling view into the digital experiences of youth and children in Malawi. While the internet provides valuable opportunities for learning and connection, it also exposes young users to serious risks that require a coordinated response. In order to protect youths and children in the digital age, Malawi must invest in digital literacy, empower parents and educators, strengthen legal frameworks, and promote safe online behavior. This report serves as a call to action for all stakeholders, government, civil society, educators, and families, to work together in building a safer, more inclusive digital environment where youths and children can develop their full potential.

