

DIGITAL YOUTH IN TIMOR-LESTE



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INTRODUCTION

Whilst there is significant research available about the social media behaviors of young Southeast Asians, very little is known about what young people in Timor-Leste are doing online.¹ As Timor-Leste has one of the most expensive and slowest internet services in the world,² its situation differs greatly to much of Southeast Asia. According to [We Are Social](#) (2022), the internet penetration in Timor-Leste is at 45% of total population, while the figure for Southeast Asia is 69%. As internet penetration continues to grow, there remains a pressing need to better understand the social media behaviors of young Timorese, as people under 35 years old constitute 74% of the population, and the median age in Timor-Leste is 20 years old.³

To address this issue, The Asia Foundation and Oxfam in Timor-Leste partnered with Love Frankie, a social change agency based in Bangkok, to conduct a study to learn about the behaviors of Timorese youth online, their understanding of digital rights and online risks, and their involvement in online social engagement.

Findings from the study will contribute to The Asia Foundation and Oxfam in Timor-Leste interventions and advocacy programs to support youth and their engagement in civic space and to ensure safety and security in the online world. In addition, the study can serve as a resource to other actors and practitioners interested in how young people engage in the online space in Timor-Leste.

Research objectives

This study sets out to understand:

- The behaviors of Timorese youth online, including their trust in information, their sharing behaviors, and influences;
- Youth understanding of digital rights, digital risks, and their knowledge on what steps to take when encountering these risks; and
- Youth passion for social issues and views on social advocacy.

1 - Child Fund and Plan International in Timor-Leste are currently undertaking research on youth digital behaviors in the municipalities of Alieu and Lautem.

2 - UNDP (2018). [Timor-Leste National Human Development Report 2018: Planning the Opportunities for a Youthful Population](#)

3 - Ibid

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address the objectives, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do Timorese youth spend time online? What are the online sources that they trust?
- What kind of information do they usually share online? And how do they share it?
- What are the social issues online that Timorese youth care about? In what ways do youth engage with government or express their opinions about government?
- What is their understanding of their digital rights?
 - And how have they learnt or become aware of these rights?
 - How important is freedom of speech versus regulations related to online defamation?
- Who are the most influential accounts followed by Timorese youth linked to social movements, activism and politics? What is supporting their popularity?
- What has made the online topics, groups or social movements that engage Timorese youth successful?
- What are the perceived risks of digital spaces among Timorese youth (e.g. online harassment, bullying, scams, restrictions etc)?
 - How are they mitigating these risks online? What actions are taken when they have a problem related to online safety?
 - Who are the most vulnerable when it comes to online risks?
 - To what extent are Timorese youth aware of options that they can use if they are at risk?
- How would internet restrictions impact on young people in Timor-Leste?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Love Frankie used a qualitative research approach that included an **online community** with Timorese youth and **key informant interviews** with youth influencers in Timor-Leste. An online community is a moderated forum which allows participants to answer questions, respond to comments, and engage with one another in a secure online environment over the course of multiple days. Respondents join the platform using only their first name or pseudonym to ensure privacy. Participants are incentivized for their time to ensure completion and quality of responses.

Love Frankie conducted a 7-day, online community with 24 Timorese youth between 16 and 24 years of age. The online community group consisted of an equal gender balance, with representatives from LGBTIQ+ and people living with disability groups. Participants mainly came from Dili, with four individuals from outside Dili. The study was conducted between 11 to 17 March, 2022, and moderated by a Timorese human rights practitioner and a journalist. The online community was supplemented with in-depth interviews with five social media influencers from 8 to 30 June, 2022.



'Recollective' online community platform interface



An example of a response by a participant in the study

KEY INSIGHTS

TIMORESE YOUTH WANT TO SET A POSITIVE EXAMPLE FOR OTHERS ONLINE

Timorese youth are not so different from youth in other parts of the world: they use online spaces primarily for entertainment and staying connected with friends and family. They are avid social media users and sharers who are eager to keep others informed about news, education, and other interesting 'life lessons' they may come across online. They seek to inspire their friends and family through their personal stories, inspirations, and aspirations - both online and offline.

Timorese youth feel a responsibility to set a good example with their online behaviour. They feel that Timor-Leste is facing a surge in negative online behavior due to expanding internet penetration and people's digital literacy skills have not kept pace. As a result, they strive to ensure that what they communicate is accurate and will not negatively affect others or attract backlash.

They trust information that comes from reliable organisations (e.g., international organizations, the government, and news agencies), and sources that are traceable, impartial and use convincing evidence. Despite this awareness, they mostly rely on social media as a source of information on everything from education to news. They tend to feel that live-streaming (e.g., Facebook Live and YouTube) and "not-overly-edited" pieces are the most credible forms of content on social media platforms. Most of their information comes from Bahasa Indonesia or English sources as there is a lack of resources in Tetun.



"My intention in sharing information and content is to help my friends improve their knowledge. I also want to be a good example to my friends and family on how to be a good social media user, which means that we are not only using online platforms for ourselves, but also for the benefit of others."

- Female, 19, Dili

AWARE OF WHAT CONSTITUTES THEIR DIGITAL RIGHTS

Timorese youth have a good grasp of their digital rights. They feel that access to the internet should be open for all and that restricting internet or social media access would be unfair. They are conscious and protective of their freedom of expression and feel that any restriction would infringe on this right. They feel that there should be a representation of different opinions online and would be concerned if this was no longer the case. That said, they do feel there are 'justifiable grounds' for restrictions if harm is caused to others online.

Timorese youth's knowledge about digital rights and etiquette is mostly learned through experience. Local resources on digital rights and how to behave online are lacking and those available are not easily accessible for all (for example, limited reach of offline workshops by INGOs or content only in Bahasa Indonesia and English).

While strong, awareness of the draft Cybercrime Law unveiled in January 2021 is not universal. The controversial law is worrying to some about how it may infringe on human rights. Some Timorese youth feel that it may be used to protect against criticism towards some groups or individuals while others question its enforceability as well as how it will be socialised in Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste - Draft Cybercrime Bill

In January 2021, a draft Cybercrime Bill was tabled as a tool to help protect Timor-Leste citizens from online crime and scams that have arisen with increased internet penetration. While the law is largely viewed as a necessary step forward in investigating and tackling cybercrimes, critics feel it does not provide effective protections to ensure the right to privacy, or protection for those who may have committed offenses unintentionally.¹

Specifically, critics feel that vague provisions may give rise to abuse of the law to curtail free speech online. Provisions such as accessing, searching, and seizing computer data, as well as intercepting and seizing electronics communications are ill-defined and open to interpretation. Some also feel the Bill would allow the government to close down civil society organisations or media houses if a violation of the law occurs on its premises or by their staff.

¹ Asia Centre (2021). [Timor Leste: Internet Freedoms Under Threat](#)



We block those who are making us uncomfortable on social media. We also change our account settings to private so that other people are not able to access our platforms and only those we know can access. Lastly, we ignore them and let them get bored with their own acts.”

- Male, 18, Dili

“It will be better if lawmakers create a law that minimizes and fights the immoral individuals who use the platforms to insult leaders online.”

- Male, 24, Dili

“We need to develop a sound set of rules to regulate those who committed online crimes.”

- Female, 19, Dili

VIGILANT BUT NOT INVINCIBLE IN THE FACE OF ONLINE RISKS

Timorese youth demonstrate a strong understanding of how to protect themselves from online risks, how to safeguard their online identity, and how to navigate false information, hate speech, and dangerous personalities online. They are aware of how to adjust security settings on social media to best protect themselves. One noted challenge is understanding how to deal with online crimes and scams as ever more sophisticated schemes are continuously emerging. Timorese youth learn from one another about scams and/or risks through shared experiences from their networks.

Timorese youth are also aware that they can report negative online behaviour to the authorities. However, they harbour concerns that authorities do not take immediate and appropriate action. Timorese youth generally agree that the government should play a pivotal role in protecting its citizens from online harms. At the moment, they are not aware of any regulations in place to protect online citizens. Examples such as monitoring and surveillance or more interventions for civic education and digital literacy were highlighted by Timorese youth as ways the government could better protect its ‘netizens’.

PASSIONATE FOR SOCIAL ISSUES, BUT NOT EMPOWERED TO ADVOCATE

Timorese youth are passionate about social issues, especially those associated with their identities. Social justice, gender equality, education, employment, and mental health are top of mind when it comes to social issues. They tend to follow people who advocate for what they stand for and people who could understand the experience of youth in Timor-Leste.

This passion for social issues does not always translate to direct action. The same reluctance they feel towards the possibility of negatively affecting others or attracting negative backlash with their social media posts is only intensified when it comes to posts that could be perceived as controversial. Compounding this trepidation is a feeling of disempowerment and powerlessness about advocating for issues. There is a concern that their voices are not heard and they only feel empowered to speak about their concerns in tight circles among people who share similar challenges, but not beyond. Stories that are less controversial are more likely to be amplified or initiated by the youth, whereas issues that are still taboo receive less attention (e.g., LGBTIQ+ rights). There is a sense that putting oneself 'out there' and risking negative attention by advocating for such issues is simply not worth it since there is little hope for change or result from the action.




"I will never share my problems on social media, because it is my privacy and I don't want other people to know."
- Male, 20, Dili

YOUTH CAN SEE A WAY FORWARD FOR IMPROVED SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Timorese youth feel that government authorities are not very responsive when it comes to concerns expressed on social media and are therefore reluctant to raise issues and concerns. They feel there is a lack of examples of online government response to citizen who raise concerns. Without these examples, Timorese youth feel a level of apathy towards raising their own concerns, as they fear doing so will only lead to negative attention. However, Timorese youth do voice a strong desire for the government to be more active in listening to their concerns.

Generally speaking, the current perception of how the government tackles social issues is mixed. While many feel a number of the government's policies are ineffective, there were some positives highlighted such as COVID-19 relief, progress on youth employment, and poverty reduction. INGOs and NGOs are well-regarded for their role in cooperating with the government to resolve local issues. For many youth, these organizations are seen as an accessible conduit to raise their voices to government.

Timorese youth are prepared to engage with government and advocate for social issues and outlined a number of ways to build their confidence and empower themselves. These include having better knowledge about issues, having clear plans to achieve their desired goals and impact, learning about constructive and non-violent approaches to dialogue, and understanding respect for others' opinions.



I see some people share their feelings online, for instance, their financial difficulties, or the flood last year where many needed help, and many more Facebook posts, but the authorities were really late to respond. Eventually, help only came from people to people. I think that the authorities don't really care about online social issues, at least, not until it goes viral, then they start to act."

- Female, 19, Dili

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the research has identified four main areas of recommendations to better engage with youth to address their concerns online and in the civic space

On communicating with youth

Use platforms that Timorese youth use and share information on frequently

Communicate through credible voices, potentially in video form for best credibility

Infographics must be eye-catching and contain easy-to-digest information

On expressing concerns and grievances

Create safe and inclusive spaces for youth to raise their voices

Advocate for improved government responsiveness in addressing youth and citizens' concerns - and ensuring these efforts are visible to the general public

On digital rights and online behaviors

Offer more educational content on digital rights and online behavior in Tetun

Monitor the spread of negative online behavior

Encourage youth to advocate for safe online behavior as they are keen to be a role model

On youth involvement in social advocacy

Ensure youth are informed and confident in supporting social causes

Show a clear path to a campaign's success and highlight the success of a group collective action

Engage NGOs to amplify the voices of Timorese youth and facilitate access to authorities

Engage with social media influencers to further amplify voices

DETAILED FINDINGS



THE ONLINE LIFE OF TIMORESE YOUTH

Timorese youth are actively engaged in online spaces, accessing information and entertainment, staying connected with people they love, and sharing their experiences with others.

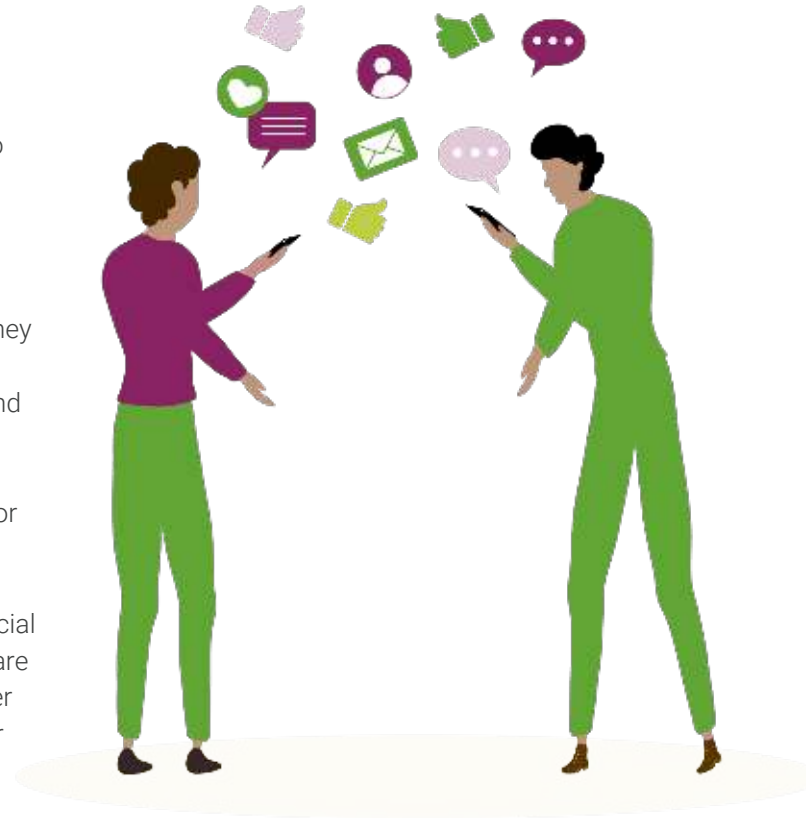
PROFILE OF ONLINE TIMORESE YOUTH

Profile overview

Timorese youth in the study are active everyday on social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube to stay connected with their friends, look at videos that are related to their passions, and to learn new skills. They are avid 'sharers' and are eager to share any formal or informal learnings with their networks through social media and messaging platforms.

They are proficient online and can navigate around different risks effectively and safely. They are well aware of the rights to which they are entitled online and agree that they should be upheld to all Timorese 'netizens'. They feel a responsibility to post about how to be safe and responsible online for their friends to see and give examples from real life experiences.

They are, however, very careful about what they post and share online for fear of causing or attracting negativity. This is mostly due to social pressure while legal repercussions from authorities is a minor (though potentially growing) concern. This pressure prevents them from being truly active citizens, instead of being content to casually post about certain social causes. They are afraid of causing any nuisance or negatively impacting others and thus are reluctant to speak out. However, they feel they could be more outspoken if they were better equipped with skills to do so. They admire influencers who inspire positive impact to other young people like Nivio Magalhaes and Bepi.



SHARING IS CARING FOR YOUNG TIMORESE

Internet opens up the world to the youth

Similar to other parts of the world, Timorese youth spend their online time seeking entertainment and staying connected with friends and family. They consume content that aligns with their hobbies and interests, such as music, sports, arts and crafts. Some participants produce their own content and share on their channels, for example, song writing, TikTok content, poems, and inspirational quotes. While Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are the most popular platforms, TikTok is growing in popularity, notably voiced among female participants.

Timorese youth are avid social media sharers

They enjoy sharing advice and new learnings with people they care about and 'sharing some good' with the online world. This includes news about current events, informative videos that they may find on YouTube and TikTok, or emotional content that resonates with them. WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular platforms for sharing information, as they are services that most people in the country use.

Sharing for online attention?

Interviews with influencers in Timor-Leste suggest that many youth post online with hopes of receiving likes and engagement on their channels. While youth participants suggest they are much more careful and aware of their online habits, influencers suggest there is a feeling that many Timorese youth are willing to share anything in order to attract attention.



Influencers youth participants follow on TikTok

The internet is now the most essential thing for us living in this modern era. It makes things easier for us; for instance, to communicate with people far away and attending online school. We can share information on the internet and...social media platforms can entertain us."

- Male, 19, Dili

"The application that I use very often is TikTok. I like scrolling up and down and it entertains me every time."

- Female, 23, Dili



First of all, in the globalization era, people need the internet to access any activities in order to express their creativity and to improve their lives. The internet is an important means to improve their knowledge in various areas such as arts, business, economy, etc, which inspires people for their self-development.”

- Female, 22, Liquica

“For example, when the government imposed the state of emergency, in which people's movements was restricted and all schools were closed due to COVID-19, the internet still provided the means to continue studying by having online classes despite the difficult situation. This is why I said that the internet is very important for our lives.”

- Male, 23, Baucau

THE PANDEMIC HAS INTENSIFIED YOUTH'S RELIANCE ON THE ONLINE WORLD

The pandemic and the imposed state of emergency enabled youth to reap the benefits of the internet through remote learning and working

As the internet has become more easily accessible in Timor-Leste, it has made the lives of Timorese a lot more convenient. The ability to access information from all over the world that benefits their work or studies has become vital for Timorese youth and this was only intensified during the pandemic. Data from [We Are Social](#) in February 2022 shows that the number of internet users in Timor-Leste has grown by 35% from January 2019 to January 2022. Participants were particularly appreciative about the ability to connect with relatives and friends around the world and to discover new hobbies at their fingertips. While access to the internet is important to all, male participants were particularly vocal about how the internet has facilitated their day-to-day activities, such as the ability to continue to work or study during the pandemic.

Using multiple providers ensures a stable connection

Timor-Leste has three major mobile network service providers in the country—Timor Telecom, Telkomcel, and Telemor. Despite a more liberalised telecommunications industry since 2012, expansion in internet infrastructure has been slow with internet connectivity in Timor Leste remaining very unreliable. In order to navigate such an unstable environment, many Timorese youth participants mentioned it is common to have more than one SIM card to ensure that they can have constant connection if one network provider fails.

As Facebook is one of the main social media platforms used by youth participants, many opt for mobile packages that offer unlimited data access to the platform. Telkomcel's unlimited internet package is the most popular among participants of the study. Most pay roughly \$15-20 per month for their data, with some saying they pay as little as \$5 or up to \$40 per month, showing a high disparity on how much youth spends on data.

YOUTH ACTIVELY SEEK OUT CREDIBLE AND VERIFIABLE SOURCES

'Live' formats are perceived as most credible

Participants mentioned they are likely to trust sources of information that are traceable, impartial, and contain convincing evidence. They place trust in official sources like international organizations, the government, and news agencies (Rádio e Televisão de Timor-Leste or Grupo Média Nacional). Journalists and news outlets are highlighted as the most credible sources due to their accountability and evidence-based reporting.

Like young people in other parts of the world, Timorese youth in the study trust social media platforms - at least to an extent. Some feel that if a platform is being used by everyone in the country, then it must be credible. In particular, live-streaming (e.g., Facebook live and YouTube) and "not-overly-edited" content are perceived to be the most credible format of information on social media platforms. They are skeptical about information from online influencers (despite following diverse personalities), anonymous social media users (e.g., fake IDs), and political groups. Despite their wide use, messaging platforms like WhatsApp are less trusted as information shared lack proper evidence and misinformation can spread too fast without proper fact checking.

Bahasa Indonesia and English are the dominant online languages

Online information in Tetun is not yet abundant - especially information that is related to education and entertainment. As a result, participants tend to access information primarily in Bahasa Indonesia and English, followed by Tetun and Portuguese. Many participants choose to consume online educational content in Bahasa Indonesia and English that they can access without a paywall.



I believe in what I often see and observe. If any information is unclear, then I would have doubts whether to trust the information or try to find similar information on a separate, reliable website."

- Male, 21. Dili

"The sources that I don't really trust are the edited videos with soundtracks or those posted on TikTok and other social media platforms."

- Female, 23, Dili



My intention, to share information or content, is to help my friends to improve their knowledge”

- Female, 19, Dili

“The main reason I share information about real events through social media is to make my friends aware of it. The other factor that influences my decision is that people are facing (problems) and it is our obligation as a human being to help other people and society.”

- Male, 23, Baucau


YOUTH ASPIRE TO BE ROLE MODELS FOR OTHERS

A feeling of responsibility to set a good example and inform others

Timorese youth in the study are well-aware of the ability one has to influence others in any capacity. As a result, they seek to inspire their friends and family both online and offline, through sharing their personal stories, inspirations, and aspirations. In particular, participants see themselves as someone who stands out from the crowd and want to ensure their networks are exposed to the same information and experiences that they enjoy.

In essence, there is a sense of privilege among the participants that comes with accessing the internet and being able to share their experiences. With this privilege comes a responsibility to share anything that they feel can benefit others in their lives. As such, they use their platforms to keep others up-to-date with what is happening in the world, their interests, their new learnings, and their lifestyles. They share informative content and their own experiences (both positive and negative) so that others can learn from them. There is a perception among the participants that Timorese younger than them are more vulnerable to online and offline harms and that they are in a position to help guide this group based on their experiences. They want to be role models for others with their online personas.

This feeling of responsibility to ensure that their followers access accurate and useful information was particularly expressed by female participants. A 22-year old female from Liquica mentioned: *“I like sharing links that provide life experiences and examples for our lives. I share them because I have a moral obligation to help my friends to understand about life itself.”*



“People feel like anything they hear they need to post it online, even though it’s just a rumour. And they get lots of likes from that, maybe 100-500 likes. People just do anything to gain the likes. When they post something, I am concerned that they post whatever they hear or see just because they think it’ll go viral.”

- Male interviewee, influencer

“There are many young people who do (share for likes). These sharings can be vulgar and unethical. Sometimes they name people based on their race, sexual orientation, and how they look. Timorese who are well educated are aware (that it’s inappropriate to name people based on these issues).”

- Female, social activist

BEING ROLE MODELS OR BEING POPULAR ONLINE AT ALL COSTS?

A “popularity mindset” is also a driving factor of online behaviour

The idea that Timorese youth are trying to positively influence others through credible information and experiences was somewhat challenged by influencers interviewed for the study. They suggested that while being seen as a role model certainly factored in the behaviour, being popular was also a significant factor. As one influencer commented, *“I noticed it’s more about the ‘popularity mindset’. They will feel happy and proud if they get more likes... Though for some they have the sense of being someone who could influence others. For someone whatever gives them more likes, they will keep on doing that.”*

The popularity mindset was not necessarily written off as a bad thing by the interviewees. Both youth participants and influencers agreed that negative online behavior is on the rise in Timor Leste and programs or interventions aimed at addressing the topic are insufficient. If Timorese youth can play a role to post and share positive information that can gain a lot of online engagement, then the strive for popularity is not negative. However, similar to other parts of the world, negative behaviours tend to gain more traction online and fuel higher engagement. Influencers highlighted that it is not uncommon for young Timorese netizens to post or share inappropriate information and images and verbally assault others online. These harmful behaviours can gain high number of likes and engagement from fellow social media users fueling the desire to continue to share this type of information in the hope of gaining more online popularity.

PASSIONATE ABOUT SOCIAL ISSUES, THOUGH LESS EXPERIENCED IN ADVOCACY

Social awareness is strong among Timorese youth

Youth participants in the study care about social issues such as social justice, gender equality, education, employment, and mental health. Looking at the social advocacy space, campaigns and rallies related to gender equality and LGBTIQA+ rights are the movements that participants noticed the most in Timor-Leste, whether led by local groups (e.g., KOKOSA) or INGOs (Plan International, was mentioned). As some of the participants live with disabilities, movements related to disability, specifically advocating for universal access, attracted their attention. Other social activities that youth are aware of in Timor-Leste include labor rights movements, movements for social justice, and movements to stop the anti-defamation law.

Social advocacy is a privilege not afforded to all

There is a reluctance among the participants to advocate for issues they care about which appears to stem from different factors. There is a preference to avoid controversial topics on social media and in real life. Stories that are less controversial are more likely to be amplified and engaged with by youth, whereas issues that are still taboo do not receive the same boost. Views from interviewees concur that being active in the civic space is reserved for the more privileged Timorese youth - for example, those based in Dili, educated in the city, and connected with influential or high level officials. This privilege provides some more outspoken and opinionated youth a sense of security which is not readily available to those with less privileges and access to support.



I participated in the movement because I was also a victim of gender discrimination. With my involvement, I intend to bring other friends in so that they do not experience the inequality and discrimination that I have suffered."

- Transman, 23, Dili

"Perhaps the barriers that prevent young people (from advocating for social causes) are fear and lack of self-confidence to raise their voice or to talk about the issues."

- Female, 18, Dili

"The number of people who are active in advocacy are low - we have to advocate more. Most people with passions for social issues are from Dili or come to seek education in Dili. I'd like to engage more with youth who are outside of our circles in rural areas, not in advocacy groups that we already know of."

- Male interviewee, influencer

I think that in order for youth to overcome these challenges, (the government) should put more effort to find jobs or solutions that can help them to address these challenges and reduce the problems they face.”

- Female, 17, Ainaro

“I have never participated in any movement because I was worried and afraid that people would not accept my opinion. Because I know that people always have different opinions.”

- Female, 21, Dili

YOUTH ARE MINDFUL OF NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES THEY MIGHT IMPOSE ON OTHERS

Non-confrontational online despite their active social media lifestyle

Despite active social media lives, Timorese youth are very careful with their online behaviour. Participant highlighted that, above all, they worry about offending or negatively affecting others with their posts. In addition, they also worry about attracting negative backlash towards themselves if they post or share anything that may be interpreted as controversial. This worry hovers over most of their posts, even when sharing their own personal stories that might benefit others (for example experiences with online scams).

Truly it is this social pressures from fellow netizens that represents the largest influence on the participants' behaviour. Influencers interviewed support this notion, relaying that stories of young people being humiliated online can be common. Screenshot of private conversations or posts on social media might get shared on private messaging platforms where they are discussed or criticised. While certainly not unique to Timor Leste, this possible outcome is a major concern for the participants.

Tension between wanting to take charge, but not standing out

When encountering any life challenges, Timorese youth believe that they are the most important agent of change for themselves. Indeed, participants of the study mentioned that they feel empowered to take the issues into their own hands and try their best to navigate around challenges first, before relying on others. They also feel that speaking up and expressing their grievances is important (even if few actually do so).

However, there is an underlying tension between wanting to be change agents and not wanting to deviate from the norm. Youth participants also mentioned they were more likely to compromise what they believe in, to fit better with the rest of the society, than break the mold. Some are concerned about the social anxiety and the feeling of being excluded. This fear extends offline as well (e.g., issues with parents, violence and conflict, and legal prosecutions) and acts as a major barrier to engaging in the civic space or in public discourse.

Bepi and Potenzo are the examples of a new generation of activists and leaders with broad knowledge and good skills to represent Timor Leste for change. They advocate for social issues such as biodiversity, culture and natural resources. So, as a young person, I am so proud to have such brilliant youth with such potential in my country.”

- Male, 23, Dili

“I’m not surprised (that young people admire me). Timor Leste is a patriarchal society. My message is that old people are in power but the country has not moved forward in the past 20 years. Young people have been excluded from participating (in civic space).”

- Female interviewee, social activist

YOUTH ADMIRE PEOPLE WHO INSPIRE THEM TO BE A BETTER VERSION OF THEMSELVES

Relatability to personal experience is key

Timorese youth tend to follow influencers who have positive impact on others, especially on issues and topics about which they are personally passionate. Many participants cited political leaders and prominent figures as their influencers, for example, ex-presidents, leaders of political parties, and figures in the resistance movement for independence.

Nivio Magalhaes, the former Secretary of State for Youth and Labour, is admired by many respondents for his inspiring content on youth personal and professional development. Bella Galhos, a renowned social activist on social justice, is praised by the group for her continuous effort in social advocacy - especially among female and LGBTIQ+ participants. Participants from vulnerable groups admired influencers who represent their identity, for example, the Asosiasaun Defensia Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste Disability Association). Lifestyle and entertainment influencers who have presence in social advocacy, like Bepi and Potenzo Lopez, are also loved by the group.

In addition, participants follow those who provide guidance on education, employment, and the struggles of young people. Juliana Marques Cabral is well-loved by the participants for her English teaching and educational content and Rania Goncalves for her motivational content.

While most of the influencers followed by the group are Timorese, many follow international influencers and celebrities, mostly from Indonesia. Types of influencers followed are mostly related to entertainment and education, for example, Borassaem (an Indonesian influencer who teaches Korean language) and Leonardo Edwin (an Indonesian Youtuber with motivational content about studying in the US).



Nivio Magalhaes -
Former Secretary of State for Youth and Sport



Bepi - social media influencer



Juliana Marques Cabral -
Youtuber/motivational influencer



Bella Galhos -
activist for women and LGBTI rights



AWARENESS OF DIGITAL RIGHTS

Timorese youth are digital natives who demonstrate a strong awareness of their digital rights

YOUTH ARE AWARE OF THE RIGHTS TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED IN THE ONLINE SPACE

Youth are familiar with the concept of digital rights

Timorese youth in the study are aware of their digital rights, albeit in an organic way. When asked to define the term “digital rights”, the group cited “rules on how to interact online,” “the right to use online services” and “freedom of expression.” When digging deeper, however, it is clear they are aware of their digital rights even without knowing an exact definition. Interviewees suggest that the awareness of digital rights is more prominent among digital savvy youth than the larger population, especially people who are no longer youth.

This awareness has been developed organically through experiences gained in the online world. Local resources on digital rights are scarce, so they rely on experience or resources from other countries. Participants mentioned that current resources available in Timor-Leste have limited reach and are not easily accessible for all (for example, small scale offline workshops by INGOs or content in Bahasa Indonesia and English).

The internet should be open to all

Participants agree that access to the internet should be universal to all Timorese. Restricting the internet or social media access without any justifiable grounds is deemed as unfair by the group. The prevailing opinion is that people should be able to express themselves online anyway they like, as long as it does not negatively affect others. They also feel netizens should be able to access any information online without limitation.



Digital rights mean that everyone has the right to use digital platforms such as telephones, laptops or computers to access the internet, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, as well as to access important information.”

- Male, 21, Dili, Living with a disability

“I think that in our country everyone can share their opinions online, as we can see very often on Facebook that many people provide comments or criticize photos or videos in certain pages.”

- Female, 24, Dili

“People easily share without awareness of whether they should share it or not, whether it's affecting others, or whether it's fact or false information. I think they don't have the skills to get around online, [not knowing] what's allowed and not allowed online, or how to scrutinize information before sharing.”

- Male interviewee, influencer/ state official

“(If the internet was restricted), first, people wouldn't be able to access any information. Secondly, we would never be able to communicate online with anyone.”

- Female, 19, Dili

“I would automatically feel disappointed and panicked because my privacy and online activities would no longer be accessible.”

- Male, 19, Dili, Influencer

“It depends on the reason why it is blocked. Perhaps, people use it to harm or defame others, and eventually, the platforms decide to block it.”

- Female, 19, Dili

INTERNET RESTRICTIONS WOULD PREVENT YOUTH FROM CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE THEY LOVE

Existing spotty connection in Timor-Leste lightens up views about internet restriction

Generally, participants agreed that internet access should be open for all. When posed with the scenario that the internet could be restricted, the immediate reaction was not that of outrage, but of how they would adapt. The reality of access to the internet being interrupted is all too common for youth in Timor-Leste and thus imagining what they would do without the internet is not a difficult task.

Participants immediately thought about the lack of entertainment platforms if the connection is restricted and less so on the absence of information from outside the country or the lack of channels to express themselves. They admit they would miss communicating with people around them the most, especially friends and relatives. For a few others, the internet offers a level of privacy and anonymity that is unavailable to them offline.

Resorting to alternative media and seeking ways to continue to access the internet were actions participants mentioned if access to the internet was restricted or prohibited. Examples of alternative media include any offline media such as TV shows, radio, books, sports, newspaper, and basic phone services like SMS or phone calls. For some, they would try their best to regain access to the internet, for instance, queries with telecommunications companies or the government to resolve the issue.

Some participants even voiced a more optimistic outlook about the lack of internet access, feeling that young people would have more time to connect with people in their lives and relearn how to interact in society without the comfort and entertainment offered by the internet. This was certainly experienced during the pandemic - both youth participants and interviewees mentioned that lockdowns enabled them to value personal connection with others outside the online world.

FREE SPEECH IS IMPORTANT AS LONG AS OTHERS' RIGHTS ARE NOT VIOLATED

Internet restriction due to conflicting views is generally not acceptable

Participants' views on internet and social media access restriction depends largely on context. While they are generally against limiting access, they feel restrictions can be admissible in certain scenarios. Some participants feel strongly that there should be consequences for individuals who violate others' online rights. One participant mentioned that if users do not comply with social media platform regulations, prohibiting internet access is acceptable and encouraged as a penalty for negative behavior.

However, internet restrictions based on personal views is unjustifiable for most of the participants. When given a scenario that the participants would be banned from accessing certain social media platforms if they disagree with the popular opinion on the platform, roughly half of the participants feel that this would be unfair. They feel that social media providers should not restrict the information users can access on their platforms.

Willing to conform to ensure access

Many participants mentioned that they would tolerate certain restrictions and simply adjust their behaviours or opinions to continue accessing their favorite platforms. Curiously, this sentiment was especially voiced by male participants. The feeling that some issues are out of their control and they have no other choice but to conform or adapt is quite strong for some participants when it comes to internet and information restriction. This further reinforces a non-confrontational attitude possessed by many Timorese youth that maintains a certain level of security. A minority of participants, however, were vocal that they would rather find an alternative platform or space where they can continue to express their views that may contradict the public, valuing the freedom of speech to which they are entitled. These participants would be happy to forego internet access and stand their ground on their views.



Because often what we post on social media will impact others, or sometimes we may spread false information that causes panic or fear to others. So every time we want to share information, we need to be sure whether it is true or not, so that we won't cause trouble to other people."

- Female, 21, Dili

"If we ban someone from accessing the internet just because they don't like [certain things], that is not good. Because, people have their own ideas about what they like, and we should never ban anyone from accessing the internet for that reason."

- Male, 20, Dili

"If the internet is restricted, then there would be no more online movement, and many people would have no idea about what's going on, and that is very dangerous for a democratic country. Because people would never know what they need and the government may manipulate things. We hope that these things will never happen."

- Male, 21, Dili

“I have the right to like either cats or dogs because it's my right and my account so I can choose whatever I want. No one has the right to tell me, 'oh you should choose cats, or oh you should choose dogs!' Everyone can have their own opinion, their own likes and dislikes.”

- Female, 18, Dili

“I see (negative posts) and give no reaction, because when I see things I don't like on social media I just skip or ignore them.”

- Female, 24, Dili

INTERNET RESTRICTIONS WOULD REDUCE THE DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS ONLINE

Without the internet, citizens' concerns might get overlooked

Participants voiced their concern that the ability to freely express diverse opinions online would be limited if the internet was restricted. They suggested this could put a strain on citizen's freedom of expression, as the internet has been used as an outlet for netizens to express themselves and voice their opinions swiftly, without going through intermediaries like TV or newspapers. Participants value the internet as a space where issues and grievances can be raised and discussed, despite the fact that many personally do not engage in such activity.

Different opinions and perspectives are the beauty of the internet

Representation of different opinions online is a highly appreciated characteristic of the internet for participants. When asked to imagine their social media feed full of content in agreement with one another, most participants would feel somewhat uncomfortable - especially when the content does not interest them. Participants said they would be likely to click "not interested" or "hide" the posts to prevent seeing the same opinion over and over again. Indeed, seeing different opinions and perspectives is something valued by the participants, with male participants being particularly appreciative.

Accessing international perspectives is highly valued

Given that Timor-Leste is a small country, being able to access information from abroad is particularly valued among the participants. Keeping up to date on news outside Timor-Leste can help Timorese youth and citizens learn from experiences and lessons abroad (which was especially important during the pandemic). In addition, being exposed to international opinions and perspectives helps participants to better understand their own domestic issues, particularly around social movements. Participants are concerned that restrictions would cause Timorese to miss out on critical information and remove an outlet to learn from other countries to better their own.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION FROM DIVERSE SOURCES IMPORTANT FOR A SMALL COUNTRY

Information access should always be open

By and large, the participants are able to access information freely without any restriction and they are free to access information both domestically and internationally. Given that Timor Leste is a small country, information from abroad is particularly valued among young participants. Keeping up to date on news outside Timor-Leste can help Timorese youth and citizens learn from experiences and lessons abroad, which was especially important during the pandemic.

The international perspective is also essential for social issues, whether it is matters related to the LGBTIQ+ community or religions. With the possibility of access to international information being halted, Timorese would miss out on access to this crucial information and lack an outlet to learn about what is happening internationally - which can be detrimental to their schooling or employment opportunities.



I would miss the communication with my friends the most if I am not able to use the internet as well as the access to both domestic and foreign information. I would not be able to watch my favorite movies or post on social media. I would miss all the things that I normally do when browsing the internet.”

- Male, 19, Dili

“Honestly, I couldn't do anything (if internet was restricted). But, if access to international sources was restricted, then there must be reasons for that. And if it really happens, I would only use local sources to better understand what is happening in my country.”

- Female, 19, Dili

A close-up photograph of two young people, likely of Timorese descent, looking at their smartphones. The person on the left is holding a black smartphone, and the person on the right is pointing at the screen of the same phone. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall tone is educational and focused on digital literacy.

NAVIGATING ONLINE RISKS

Timorese youth demonstrate adequate knowledge and skills in safeguarding themselves online.

TIMOR-LESTE IS FACING A SURGE IN NEGATIVE ONLINE BEHAVIOR

High awareness of the challenges the online world can bring

As internet penetration grows in Timor Leste, online risks increasingly affect its youth. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to a rapid and increased use of the internet among the general population. With this surge, online knowledge, skills, and general etiquette have not been able to keep pace. Participants highlight that they notice more negative online behaviors and increased vulnerability of users in the online space over the past couple of years.

According to interviews, influencers concerns about negative online behavior are focused mostly on verbal harassment and sharing of inappropriate or violent content. Online defamation and bullying has also become prevalent, particularly observed during the time of election campaigns. The use of fake IDs/ usernames is widespread, making it difficult to track down the perpetrators of negative behaviours. A few of the influencers who were interviewed as a part of the study linked the spread of inappropriate or violent content to the desire to increase engagement, and therefore, popularity. Youth participants attributed the spread of this content to low levels of digital literacy in Timor-Leste.

Participants are conscious that cyberbullying, hate speech, and harassment online could result in distress and mental health issues, with some participants admitting they have personally experienced these themselves. There was, however, some underlying attitudes that cyberbullying was an appropriate reaction and was a deserved consequence of negative behaviour online.



In Timor-Leste, cyberbullying and false information are serious issues. Many people often create fake accounts to share hate speech and false information. For example, we can see now that many political parties are having unhealthy competition on social media. And I think that it is not good, because they insult each other on Facebook.”

- Female, 19, Dili

“I think Timor-Leste is still very new in terms of internet access. Many people still do not understand how to use the internet properly. According to my observation, many people (especially women), often suffer from online discrimination. People steal their identities to create fake accounts aiming at discrediting the women, and damaging their dignity and privacy. This creates a huge problem in society.”

- Male, 21, Dili

“I called out some people I know who bullied others and their response was that this is the consequence for someone who expose their private stuff online. This is how they see it.”

- Male interviewee, influencer



I think it's important to protect ourselves from online risks because sometimes we use social media online improperly and may even cause risks to ourselves. We have to protect ourselves by using social media properly and avoid the risks to ourselves and others."

- Male, 21, Dili, Living with a disability

"I think Timorese youth learn about online risks by learning from people around them and internet resources."

-Female, 18, Dili

"I have received many scams from anonymous people. How do we prevent online scams and crimes in Timor? We have to refrain from accessing unknown websites and platforms, we should not access the links shared by unknown people, and we should not share any viral false information on social media."

- Female, 19, Dili

YOUTH ARE CONFIDENT IN PROTECTING THEMSELVES ONLINE

Security settings, reporting to related parties, and being vigilant are steps taken by youth

Timorese youth in the study demonstrate strong competency in safeguarding themselves from various online risks. They feel more competent at this than the rest of the online population in Timor-Leste. They are well aware of how to navigate online risks and secure their online identity by being mindful of what is shared online. They generally know how to adjust their security settings on social media to protect them from unwanted attention. When encountering false information, hate speech, and dangerous personalities online, they verify to check the credibility of the source. Participants are also willing to report accounts that spread negative narratives or that act dangerously, ensuring others will not be vulnerable to these accounts.

Participants also agree that there should be consequences for negative behaviour, though how this manifests is less clear. Ideas mentioned include restricted access to specific sites or being subjected to legal action. Reporting the matter to social media platforms that could block the users could ensure that perpetrators are faced with appropriate penalties for their actions. For extreme cases, such as identity theft, sharing personal information, or harassment, participants feel police authorities (Criminal Investigation Scientific Police, National Police of Timor Leste) should become involved. However, the degree to which this would be actioned is subject to debate. According to a female influencer, *"Youth know how to deal with these issues but not everyone. People around me report and raise it to the platforms and the authorities but it takes ages to identify the perpetrator. There are a lot of processes on Facebook and (the police) don't want to be bothered with it."*

YOUTH LEARN ABOUT RISKS AND HOW TO PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM OTHERS

Learning about risks is an organic process


Youth in the study are quite confident in their ability to protect themselves and be vigilant. The majority of participants started to learn about these online risks organically from using the internet and from their personal experience. While some feel perfectly safe online, a large proportion of the participants reported having personally encountered unpleasant experiences online or knowing of friends or family members with these experiences. These negative incidents include online insults and harassment, misinformation and hoaxes, hacking, catfishing, unauthorized sharing of personal information, and scams.

Sharing experiences to inform others

Participants stated that while they feel they protect themselves appropriately online, they worry that other people their age are vulnerable to online risks. As mentioned, youth in the study felt the responsibility to set an example for positive online behaviors for other users who may be less proficient online. The group uses their social media channels to share knowledge and learnings that they think would be beneficial to others - acting as an information hub. They have also benefited from this information from others in the past.

Protection from online scams is a work in progress

While behaviour protecting themselves from negativity and fake news is well developed, participants admit that understanding how to prevent themselves from being victims of online crimes and scams is still developing. Respondents suggest they could protect themselves by being attentive of unknown platforms/websites, verifying the platforms/sources, and using strong passwords. However, many others are unaware of how to safeguard themselves against ever more sophisticated online scams.



(There was) a case of identity theft, but when she reported it to the police, they seemed to ignore it... so I (would) prefer to block them, change my privacy settings, and ignore them.”


- Male, 18, Dili

“I never shared (my negative experiences) on social media because I fear negative responses from other people. I only discuss or share it with friends and family or speak directly with them.”

- Female, 21, Dili

“Personally, I don't feel safe when I visit websites that are not credible or are unknown because they often come with viruses that hack our accounts. So, I am always very careful when I do any online activities on these type of websites.”

- Male, 19, Dili, Influencer



The most vulnerable are youth groups and children...Because these groups still lack sufficient knowledge on how to manage their privacy online.”

- Male, 19, Dili, Influencer

“Girls are more vulnerable online because they receive sexist comments. Whenever someone posts something on TikTok that is [controversial], people would bring on other personal stuff they shared online to attack them. If they don't use platforms to do good to others, they would be at risk because people can both share posts for fun or to bully.”

- Male interviewee, influencer

“There are particular groups more likely to be harmed by online risks such as the LGBTI community. Many people still cannot accept the identity that they represent. They are most likely to be at risk, not just online, but also offline.”

- Transman, 23, Dili

“Especially those who are in positions of power from the government and political parties. Holding a certain position in the government puts one most at-risk online.”

- Female interviewee, social activist

YOUTH HAVE A CLEAR PICTURE OF WHO ARE THE MOST VULNERABLE ONLINE

Youth, LGBTQIA+ groups, and women are most vulnerable online

Youth and children were highlighted as vulnerable as they are yet to be aware of the risks associated with the space and are less equipped to deal with negative situations online. Young females are especially at risk of sexual abuse and harassment online, and interviews confirmed that female youth are most often the victims of online attacks, e.g., bullying for their appearances or personal issues.

LGBTQIA+ groups can be vulnerable as well. Social and religious stigma towards these groups often manifests in both online and offline harassment.

The 2022 presidential election campaign resulted in a plethora of attacks towards political actors and candidates online, especially female candidates

Given the study was conducted during the 2022 presidential election campaign, online attacks and criticisms towards political candidates was difficult to ignore. Most prominently, the online space became a battleground for political actors and their supporters to attack their opponents. Online citizens frequently use their social media channels to criticize political actors and public figures.

Attacks against female presidential candidates were prominent at the time of the election campaigns. Female political actors are at additional risk, and attacks against them are often based on gender discrimination.

MARTIAL ARTS GROUPS ARE SUBJECT TO ONLINE ATTACKS DUE TO PREVAILING STEREOTYPE

Strong perception on martial arts groups' vulnerability online

Many of the youth in the study perceived that people associated with martial arts groups are most at-risk when it comes to online attacks and risks. Some cite that social media has been a tool to provoke members of opposing groups. There is a perception that rivalries between martial arts group from the offline world manifest in the online space. Furthermore, youth participants noticed that martial arts group members have been attracting negative attention from netizens, and that martial arts groups have become more prevalent since the internet has become more accessible.

An interview with an individual knowledgeable on the topic of youth and martial arts groups reveals further insights into why these groups are viewed as the most vulnerable online (see text box below). The online space has exacerbated the existing negative stereotype Timorese have about people associated with martial arts groups.

Media depiction of martial arts groups fueling negative views

Over the past two decades, media has played a role in shaping Timorese's views on martial arts groups, with frequent reports on violent clashes between groups. News about assaults between different groups of individuals are quickly generalized as conflicts between martial group members. This exacerbates the negative depiction of martial arts group in the media.

During lockdown, images and videos of martial arts group members were circulated widely on social media - provoking further criticism of the groups online. This might have contributed to why youth participants perceive that martial arts groups are the most vulnerable in online spaces. Discussion and criticisms around the violence are prevalent online.



I think that the groups that are more likely harmed by online risks are the people who are involved in martial arts groups. Because they use social media to provoke, and insult one another. I think they have higher risks."

- Female, 17, Ainaro

"Martial arts groups are the most vulnerable. Because every time they post something, people always react with negative comments."

- Male, 20, Dili

"Since 2002, the media has played a role in portraying martial arts groups as always fighting and it has become a stereotype. Whenever we hear about violence or fighting, people generalize that it's because people are from a particular martial arts group."

- Male interviewee, influencer/ state official



Set up campaigns and involve all youth from rural and urban areas to increase understanding and knowledge about (how to interact online). I think it is better to create such activities in the school curriculum, as it would provide basic knowledge to kids.”

- Female, 19, Dili

“I would create a system to be able to detect hate speech or bad words in order to prevent people from posting bad content online...(Those who post) would have a sense of fear when they want to share bad stuff online.”

- Male, 21, Dili

“I think, the Cybercrime Law is good because many people often use social media without responsibility.”

- Female, 22, Liquica

“We have so many laws that people don't know of. They just do what they please. Just making the law clear is not enough; how we're implementing the law is important. If there's a law for cyber crimes, it's how we go about enforcing it.”

- Female interviewee, social activist

MORE ACTIONS TO PROTECT NETIZENS ONLINE NEEDED

Government interventions for digital literacy and civic education

The participants refer to training from INGOs and youth groups, and resources in Bahasa Indonesia or English for content around digital rights and online risks. Current resources from INGOs and local youth groups focus on combating misinformation and cyberbullying. While these are certainly needed, online privacy and security are areas mentioned by the respondents that need attention.

The group wishes there are more sources on the topic available locally. Suggestions to address the knowledge gap included integrating the subject in the education curriculum, awareness-raising campaigns that target young people (e.g., video contests), and promoting tolerance in digital literacy courses.

Blurred lines on government interventions to combat misinformation

Overall, participants unanimously agree that the government does not do enough to protect citizens from online risks. Some youth in the study agreed that government and authorities have to put more effort into surveillance to control the spread of false information and negative online content through content moderation. Some even suggested monitoring efforts from the government can go as far as to invade the privacy of the users in order to protect the citizens from online risks. Validation with influencers and activists warn that the tight restriction and surveillance from the authorities could do more harm than good.

Hesitancy around the draft Cybercrime Law

The awareness of the draft Cybercrime law is not overly high among young participants and elicits a mixed reaction from those who are aware. Among those who are optimistic, the sense is the enactment of the law could protect the privacy and security of Timorese netizens. Those who are more critical of the law worry about its enforceability and potential to be used to protect against criticism towards particular groups. Views from influencers stressed that the socialization of different laws in the past has been less visible by the public and that the language used in these laws are not easily digestible for most citizens. Generally, more efforts in socializing and enforcing any laws are required to ensure it will be put into good use.

Socially aware youth are unsure if their voices will be heard.

BARRIERS TO ONLINE ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL CAUSES AND GOVERNMENT

YOUTH FEEL POWERLESS TO MAKE CHANGES THAT ARE LARGER THAN THEMSELVES

Only empowered to speak up in limited capacity

While concerns about negative consequences and backlash cannot be denied, the feeling of powerlessness is another major factor affecting online engagement. Youth respondents expressed that they do not have enough capacity and do not feel empowered to speak up on most issues. There is also a perception that young people are not heard and their concerns are not taken seriously.

Participants only feel empowered to speak about their concerns among people who share similar challenges (e.g. other youth). They are aware that they could bring their concerns and challenges to the authorities on issues related to online spaces like cyberbullying or offline concerns like access to education or employment opportunities. However, participants rarely raise their concerns with the government. To work around this, participants say they rely on community leaders or NGOs to represent their concerns.

Interviewees emphasise that Timorese society does not allow youth to express their emotions and concerns, effectively excluding them from the civic space. Issues that are considered as “uncharted territory” or taboo for activists have even less chance of being voiced by youth. For new or emerging issues, if no one has advocated for the topic before, the reception from the public remains unknown and therefore, the risk of being perceived negatively is much higher. One interviewee explains the cultural factor that contributes to the low tendency to express concerns: *“We grew up in a really rough society in which expressing emotions is perceived as weak. It’s not a cultural habit here. It’s hard for people to express their stress when they’re down.”*



I never tried to provide any suggestion or criticism because I am not in charge of anything and people do not listen to me. For instance, when I try to give any advice to a friend in an organization in order to tackle some issues that we face, people won't listen to me.”

- Female, 19, Dili

“In Timor-Leste there is a lack of assistance for people who report some cases and that is why they are afraid to voice it out.”

- Male, 18, Dili

“Youth care about the negative consequences, which is both a good and bad thing. They are selective on the issues they want to talk about. Many activists are unwilling to talk about LGBTIQA+ issues. People are scared of being labeled as LGBTIQA+.”

- Female interviewee, social activist



I think the government is not responsive to online social issues because many people have presented the problems and challenges they face, but there is no real action (from the government authorities)."

- Transman, 23, Dili

"I think we have seen that the government have made some efforts to conduct social action. During the COVID-19 pandemic the government provided household subsidies in the sum of \$200/HH and a food basket program to respond to the problems."

- Male, 23, Bacau

MIXED VIEWS ON THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIVENESS TO CITIZEN'S CONCERNS

More government action to support youth

Youth participants generally feel the government is ineffective in its policies, and they feel more action is needed to solve issues that are important to them. These include upskilling youth in rural areas, improving access to education, and promoting youth employment. Young people with disabilities face extra challenges with discrimination or access to public services and feel these have been largely unmet by the government.

The participants feel that they are left with no choice but to find solutions for their issues themselves or through other intermediaries like NGOs. NGOs are well-regarded in their cooperation with the government to resolve local issues, hence, they are seen as a conduit to raise their voices and concerns to the government. Groups or movements such as KOKOSA and Plan International were highlighted as examples of successful advocacy initiatives.

Despite these shortcomings, youth in the study did highlight examples where they thought the government was doing good work, such as poverty reduction, subsidies during the pandemic for people with disabilities, infrastructure, and gender equality. Actions during the pandemic such as cash vouchers and food basket programs were noticed by the youth and perceived as effective interventions.

A SPACE FOR YOUTH TO RAISE THEIR VOICES BUT IS ANYONE LISTENING?

Government and authorities do not engage online

A large factor in youth reluctance to speak out about issues or engage with the government is a perception that no one is listening. Concerns expressed on social media barely receive any attention from the authorities or the government. Based on experiences and observations, participants do not see examples of online grievances being responded to by the government. This contributes to youth's reluctance to advocate about issues online. Some participants mentioned that if they do not see the success stories of people raising their concerns, they would not take actions assuming their efforts would be fruitless.

An interviewee highlighted that social media can be helpful to raise concerns to the authorities, but only when it goes viral. People who have large social media followers and access to high profile individuals online are more likely to receive online attention when advocating for any issues online, while 'general netizens' would not receive the same recognition.

Despite the low engagement rates, participants perceive social media as an effective advocacy tool. Similarly, participants view social media as a potentially useful feedback mechanism to the government. They agree that if properly developed and maintained, it can be a viable and convenient option for civic engagement.



"We use social media as an advocacy and campaign tool in this digital era since many people are using smartphones and accessing social media platforms."

- Male, 21, Dili

"I think that the government are not responsive when it comes to social issues online. As we see on social media platforms, many youth raise concerns to the government about unemployment in Timor and post it on some active government pages. But they probably don't even see it. There is no comment or solution at all."

- Female, 19, Dili

"Those who are scared, they are using fake IDs. I believe that they are concerned about their security: being bullied and facing legal consequences. For those working, they fear they could be forced out of their job."

- Female interviewee, social activist



“I think the factors that motivate young people to talk about their issues are the things that affect them every day...they are more comfortable talking about these because they understand them. Otherwise, if you talk about things that aren't relevant, they may not be willing to engage.”

- Male, 18, Dili

“I have never participated in any movement because I have been worried and afraid that people would not accept my opinion.”

- Female, 21, Dili

“For those who are actively involved in certain groups, they might be influenced by their peers or their leaders. If they are active in the volunteering space or in NGOs, they would want to be role models (for others).”

- Female interviewee, influencer

THOUGH CONFIDENCE LACKS, A PATHWAY TO BETTER ENGAGEMENT EXISTS

Ensuring youth are equipped with the right skills, knowledge, and attitudes to participate in social movements

The feeling that voices are not being heard can be extended to advocating for social issues. Youth participants feel that they have never seen any impact or change from online social movements and feel they only result in negative commentary. This contributes to a feeling of powerlessness that discourages youth from engaging.

The participants did however mention ways through which they felt their confidence to advocate and engage could be improved. These include:

1. Ensuring youth have adequate information and awareness about a topic before engaging
2. Highlighting a clear path to desired impact and how to accomplish it so youth can visualise the ways in which their efforts could materialise
3. Learning about constructive and non-violent approaches and being respectful of others' opinions

And not surprisingly, some young people in the study just need a little encouragement as they mentioned those who are active in the civic space are more likely to be those who are empowered to do so by their peers or youth groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ON COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

1. Using platforms that youth love and are familiar with like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Youtube. TikTok is another emerging platform for female youth seeking online entertainment.
2. Encouraging social media sharing through WhatsApp and Facebook.
3. Using news agencies or government agencies to disseminate information through social media platforms as they are perceived as the most credible.
4. Using video content that is not-overly-edited for best credibility (Facebook Live and YouTube would be well-received).
5. Use of eye-catching, entertaining, and educational infographics - with easy-to-digest texts that are relatable to Timorese youth's personal experiences.



ON EXPRESSING CONCERNS AND GRIEVANCES

1. Creating a safe, non-judgemental, and inclusive environment for youth to raise their voices both online and offline. Having a moderator for online spaces that ensure conversations are civil would be welcomed by Timorese youth.
2. Illustrating how social issues are dealt with by the government and authorities to showcase how these organizations are taking serious actions. This could be social media campaigns with case studies of successful programs/ interventions.
3. Advocating for improved government responsiveness in addressing youth and citizen concerns. For example, a simple chatbot on Facebook Messenger could give the sense that someone is listening to standard questions with the option to speak to someone directly if unsatisfied with the answer.



ON DIGITAL RIGHTS AND ONLINE BEHAVIORS

1. Offering educational content on digital rights and positive online behaviors that are easily accessible to all and potentially scalable in Tetun.
2. Advocating for policy changes to include digital, news, information, and media literacy education in the national curriculum.
3. Encouraging Timorese youth to campaign for safe online behaviors leveraging their enthusiasm and willingness to help others.
4. Producing content that educates Timorese about online scams and crimes.



ON YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL ADVOCACY

1. Ensuring youth are informed about social issues they want to advocate for through awareness raising or knowledge and skills training
2. Showing how youth can be a valuable part of the success of the movement and that solidarity will result in the success.
3. Highlighting the success of a group collective action in any social movement
4. Having a clear path to success and actions that would contribute to the end goal
5. Engaging NGOs to help amplify the voice of youth and increase youth's access to the government
6. Leveraging social media influencers that youth follow and admire





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