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Perceived Impacts of Global Online Content on 16 to 18-Year-Old Students' Wellbeing: Insights from Educators in Malta, Italy, Portugal, and Cyprus

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines how national policy frameworks in Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and Portugal address the wellbeing risks associated with global digital media exposure among students aged 16 - 18, and how 12 educators in these four countries perceive these challenges within their classrooms. Drawing on Marginson's glonacal perspective and Banks's digital citizenship framework, the study triangulates policy analysis with interviews. Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and classroom practice. Although national strategies acknowledge online risks and position digital wellbeing as a cross-curricular responsibility, three key tensions emerged: online harm often occurs beyond school hours and is perceived as outside educators' direct control; teachers face limited time and expertise while delivering extensive high-stakes curricula and responding to complex digital and social challenges; and students are frequently more familiar with rapidly evolving online content than some staff. The study argues that predominantly reactive and regulatory measures, such as restricting mobile phone use during lessons, are insufficient. It concludes that digital wellbeing requires sustained professional development addressing the psychosocial dimensions of technology, implemented in ways that are sensitive to educators' workload. These findings contribute to debates on fostering student resilience within an increasingly borderless digital environment.

Keywords

Digital Wellbeing, Digital Risk, Online Safety, Digital Citizenship, Educator Preparedness

1. Introduction

Online digital content has transformed the educational landscape, changing how students and educators access information, develop their identities, and engage with the world (Livingstone et al., 2022). Across Europe, students and educators are immersed in digitally mediated environments that cross national borders and expose them to global online content. While such connectivity broadens educational opportunities and fosters intercultural dialogue (Selwyn, 2016), it also introduces complex psychological, social, and academic challenges (OECD, 2021). This dual nature of digital exposure, simultaneously enriching and potentially harmful, heightens the responsibility of schools and educational institutions to respond in a strategic and ethical manner.

Digital wellbeing in this study is understood as the capacity of individuals to maintain psychological, social, and academic balance while engaging with digital technologies. It extends beyond online safety, which focuses primarily on protection from harm (e.g., cyberbullying or exploitation), and beyond digital citizenship, which emphasises ethical and responsible participation in digital environments (Banks, 2020). It is also distinct from problematic internet use (PIU), which refers to excessive or compulsive engagement with digital platforms associated with negative mental health outcomes (Cai et al., 2023). Instead, digital wellbeing encompasses a broader, holistic perspective that includes emotional regulation, healthy digital habits, critical engagement with online content, and the ability to sustain positive functioning across educational and social domains (Livingstone et al., 2022; WHO Europe, 2024). This conceptual distinction ensures analytical clarity throughout the study.

Recent European data from Eurostat (2025) show that 97% of people aged 16 to 29 in Europe use the internet daily, with 88% of them using social media and 24% taking online courses (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Percentage of daily EU internet users adapted from Eurostat (2025).

Category	Percentage of EU individuals aged between 16 and 29 years who make daily use
Daily internet use	97%
Social media	88%
Online Courses	24%

Educational leadership across Europe has increasingly moved towards embedding digital safeguarding, critical digital literacy, and structured wellbeing initiatives within school policy frameworks (BeSmartOnline, 2022; European Commission Expert Group, 2024). However, although national strategies offer broad policy direction, limited research has examined how educators teaching students aged 16 - 18 across different European contexts experience the perceived benefits and challenges associated with these initiatives in their classrooms. This paper

presents a qualitative exploration of perspectives from 12 educators from Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and Portugal who engaged in structured professional dialogue during a face-to-face professional development course. The study does not aim to generalise findings to national systems but explores the perspectives of three educators from each country regarding how they perceive and interpret strategies implemented in their classrooms in response to the influence of global digital exposure on student wellbeing. Although school identities remain confidential for ethical reasons, sufficient contextual detail is provided to enable meaningful interpretation of the issues described. By analysing how participants from four different countries conceptualise and address digital-related wellbeing challenges, the study offers cross-contextual insight into how macro-level digital governance intersects with educators' lived professional realities.

1.1. Terminology of Educational Institutions

The terminology used to describe schools serving students aged 16 to 18 varies across the four national contexts examined. In Malta, these schools are designated as post-secondary schools; in Italy, they are known as Liceo Superiore; in Cyprus, as Lyceums (Lykeio); and in Portugal, as Ensino Secundário. These distinctions are presented in Table 2. For analytical clarity and consistency, these institutions will hereafter be collectively referred to as post-secondary schools.

Table 2. Terminology of educational institutions.

Country	Age of Students (years)	School
Malta	16 - 18	Post-Secondary
Italy	16 - 19	Liceo Superiore (Upper secondary)
Cyprus	15 - 18	Lykeio (Lyceum)
Portugal	15 - 18	Ensino Secundário (Secondary)

Although the nomenclature and structural configurations differ across systems, educators within each context face comparable responsibilities. They are required to respond to the psychological, social, and academic consequences associated with students' engagement with global digital media (OECD, 2021). Addressing these challenges has consequently become an increasingly prominent priority within national education management and policy agendas (AGCOM, 2025; European Commission, 2025a; Government of Malta, 2022; MEYR, 2024).

1.2. Research Gap

Although a substantial body of literature documents the prevalence and mental health implications of problematic internet use (PIU), with selected evidence summarised in Table 3, there remains limited understanding of how national policy frameworks translate into lived professional experiences for educators.

Table 3. Problematic internet use.

Source and Year	Problem	Key Statistic
Cai et al. (2023) Meta-Analysis	Depression, anxiety, loneliness, suppressed wellbeing	Problematic Internet Use (PIU) correlated with depression (r = 0.313), anxiety (r = 0.277), loneliness (r = 0.252) and lower wellbeing (r = −0.213). *r = Pearson correlation coefficient.*
European Commission (2025a)	Excessive screen time	More than 80% of students between 9 and 15 years of age spend more than 3 hours daily watching a screen of a digital device.
OECD (2025)	Digital addiction	22% 15 years old females and 13% males of the same age feel anxious when without a digital device.
Portelli (2024)	Lower educational outcomes and suppressed emotional stability	A qualitative study of eight Maltese 18-year-olds identified distraction, reduced academic motivation, shortened attention span, anxiety, low self-esteem, social comparison, cyberbullying, diminished academic focus, and suppressed wellbeing.
Office of the Surgeon General (2023)	Risk of depression and anxiety	This statistic is not from Europe, but from the United States of America, which states that adolescents who spend more than three hours of screen time daily have double the risk of developing depression and anxiety.
WHO Europe (2024)	Problematic social media use	In 2018, problematic social media use among adolescents was 7%. In 2022, this rose to 11%.
Zammit (2023a)	Perceived decline in students' empathy and a rise in cyberbullying cases	A qualitative case-study approach in Maltese secondary schools, involving in-depth interviews with 21 participants, including educators, policymakers and experts, as well as document analysis of national policies.

In particular, the relationship between macro-level policy directives and educators' experiences with digital-related wellbeing concerns at the post-secondary level of education remains underexplored.

1.3. Aims of the Study

This study seeks to explore educators' experiences with digital-related wellbeing concerns at the post-secondary level of education. Drawing on national policy analysis, relevant literature, and insights from 12 educators working with students aged 16 to 18 years, the research examines how national frameworks address digital wellbeing and explores classroom experiences across the four contexts to mitigate related challenges.

1.4. Research Questions

1) How do national education policy frameworks in Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and

Portugal respond to the impact of global digital media exposure on the wellbeing of post-secondary students?

2) How do educators across the four contexts experience and respond to digital-related wellbeing concerns among students aged 16 - 18 within their school settings?

2. Literature Review

This literature review is structured in three parts. It begins by outlining the theoretical frameworks that guide the study, providing a conceptual lens for interpreting global digital influences and educators' responses. It then synthesises national policy documents from Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and Portugal to examine how schools are expected to respond to the challenges posed by global online content. Finally, the review engages with contemporary empirical research on the psychological, social, and academic dimensions of student wellbeing, with particular attention to harmful online content, misinformation, scams, unrealistic social comparisons, cyberbullying, and related digital risks.

Although some studies included in this review examine younger adolescents or university populations, their inclusion is analytically justified given the developmental continuity of digital behaviours and psychosocial processes into late adolescence. Evidence suggests that patterns of online engagement, social comparison, and emotional regulation established in early adolescence often persist into the 16 - 18 age group, while university-level findings provide insight into the longer-term implications of these behaviours (Livingstone et al., 2022; Cai et al., 2023). These studies, therefore, offer relevant conceptual and empirical grounding for understanding post-secondary students' experiences (**Figure 1**).

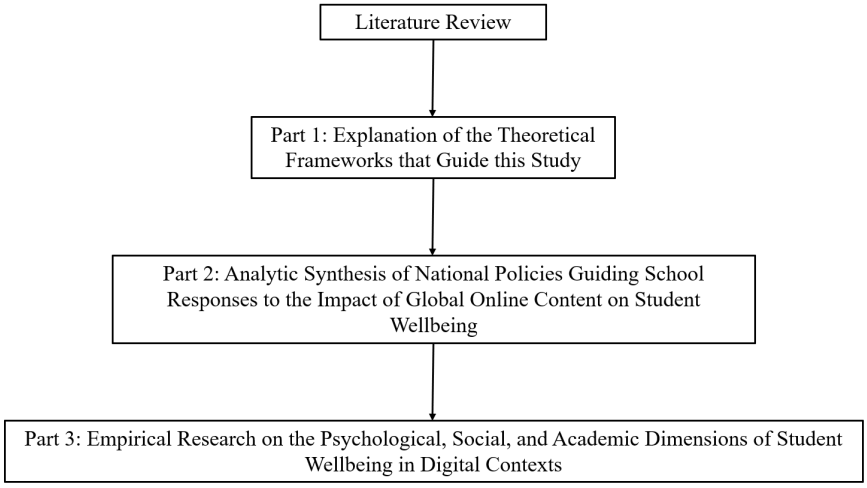

Figure 1. The three parts synthesising this literature review.

This three-part structure moves from conceptual foundations to policy-level expectations, and finally to empirical evidence, thereby establishing a coherent analytical framework for examining how digital-related wellbeing concerns are

understood and enacted in post-secondary settings.

2.1. Part 1: Theoretical Framework Guiding This Study

This study is grounded in Marginson's (2022) theory of global education and Banks' (2017, 2020) global citizenship education model. These frameworks were selected to examine how global digital flows influence educational leadership and student wellbeing.

Marginson's (2022) glonacal perspective (global-national-local) argues that education systems are increasingly shaped by transnational movements of information, technology, and cultural norms. These global forces interact with national structures, requiring school leaders to respond to influences that extend beyond local policy contexts. Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) must therefore address the psychological, social, and academic implications of global digital trends affecting students' behaviour, identity, and learning trajectories.

Complementing this macro-level lens, Banks (2017, 2020) emphasises the role of schools in cultivating critical thinking, ethical awareness, and cultural understanding within globalised societies. His model moves beyond superficial internationalisation, encouraging reflective engagement with global issues encountered through digital media.

Together, these frameworks offer both structural and pedagogical foundations. Marginson (2022) explains how globalisation reshapes education systems, while Banks (2017, 2020) provides an ethical and wellbeing-oriented response. Their relevance is heightened in contexts where adolescents are exposed to harmful online content, including cyberbullying, self-harm material, and unrealistic social comparisons (Fenech & Zammit, 2025; MEYR, 2024; OECD, 2017).

2.2. Part 2: Analytic Synthesis of National Policies Guiding School Responses to the Impact of Global Online Content on Student Wellbeing

National policy documents from Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and Portugal (**Table 4**) were analysed to examine how different countries address the wellbeing implications of global digital content and guide school leadership responses. This section synthesises the principal findings.

Across the four national contexts, various structural patterns become evident. All countries show alignment with broader European digital frameworks, reflecting Marginson's (2022) glonacal dynamic where global benchmarks and EU directives influence national policy structures. However, the main focus differs: Malta highlights whole-school digital citizenship and psychosocial awareness; Italy emphasises legal regulation and infrastructure; Portugal combines literacy and inclusion through specific initiatives; and Cyprus stresses access and digital skills development. While digital competence is generally promoted, the explicit integration of psychological and academic wellbeing remains inconsistent. This comparative mapping indicates that although digital transformation is embedded

within schools, its translation into coherent, cross-disciplinary wellbeing practices is less consistently articulated. Despite all four countries recognising the educational potential of global online content, their approaches to wellbeing vary.

Table 4. Comparative analysis of national digital wellbeing policies.

Country	Key Documents	Core Pillars/ Focus Areas	Theoretical Alignment (Marginson & Banks)	Key Strengths for Student Wellbeing	Implementation Gaps/Challenges
Malta	Digital Education Strategy 2025-2030 (MEYR, 2024) BeSmartOnline! (2025) National Cybersecurity Strategy (Ministry for the Economy, European Funds and Lands, 2023)	1. Digital Global Citizens 2. Educator Empowerment 3. Community Engagement 4. Digital Resources	Glonacal: Strong alignment between EU targets and national pillars. Banks: Explicit "Whole-school" digital citizenship approach.	Multi-sectoral collaboration (Police, Education, Social Welfare). Empirical helpline data used to inform policy.	"Siloed" training: focus remains on ICT/PSCD teachers; lack of clarity on integration for other subject teachers. *N.B. At the post-secondary level, students do not study Personal and Social Communication Development (PSCD) subject*
Italy	PNSD (National Digital School Plan) (Ministry of Education, 2022) AGCOM Literacy Report (AGCOM, 2025) BIK Policy Profile (European Commission, 2026)	1. Infrastructure/ Access 2. Learning Spaces 3. Competencies/ Content 4. Staff Training	Glonacal: Interaction between EU benchmarks and domestic "La Buona Scuola" reforms. Banks: Focus on students as active producers/citizens.	Strong legal framework (Law 71/2017) for cyberbullying. Focus on "Digital Rights" and universal access.	Policy is largely reactive/law-centred. Low trust in schools' ability to protect; teacher training still "in development."
Cyprus	National Action Plan for Digital Skills (Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy, 2020) BIK Policy Profile (BIK, 2025b) Alexander Research Survey (Alexander Research Centre, 2020)	1. Infrastructure Upgrades 2. Teacher DigCompEdu training 3. Social Inclusion/STEM 4. Vulnerable Groups	Glonacal: EU Digital Compass 2030 filters into national strategy. Banks: Inclusion/Access focus for all digital society.	Dedicated policies for children's digital rights (2018). Strong empirical evidence of addiction from local research.	High-level "aspirational" language. Lack of concrete, school-level guidelines for Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs).
Portugal	Digital Strategy 2030 (Republica Portuguesa, 2025) SeguraNet Initiative (Seguranet, 2025) BIK Policy Profile (BIK, 2025a)	1. People (Literacy/STEM) 2. Business/Gov 3. Infrastructure 4. Cybersecurity Culture	Glonacal: Direct localisation of BIK+ EU frameworks. Banks: Focus on gender equity (Girls in STEM) and ethical use.	SeguraNet provides practical toolkits and helplines. Strong focus on equity and bridging the gender digital divide.	Fragmented implementation; reliance on ad-hoc events (e.g., Safer Internet Day) rather than systemic curriculum integration.

2.2.1. Maltese National Policies

The Maltese framework demonstrates relatively strong vertical alignment between EU digital priorities and national educational objectives. Measures linking digital citizenship, educator empowerment, and community engagement indicate an attempt to move beyond infrastructure towards cultural change within schools. In theoretical terms, this reflects Banks' (2020) call for ethical digital participation and Marginson's (2022) observation that global norms are localised through national policy instruments. However, ambiguity remains regarding implementation at subject-specialist level, raising questions about how evenly such responsibilities are distributed across disciplines.

Table 5 shows how Malta adopts a comparatively integrated approach, explicitly connecting digital transformation with psychological, social, and academic wellbeing.

Table 5. Summarised analysis of Maltese national policy frameworks.

Maltese Documents	Key Strategy/Measure	Detailed Focus & Provisions	Theoretical Alignment	Implications for SLTs & Wellbeing
Digital Education Strategy 2025-2030 (MEYR, 2024)	Pillar 1: Nurturing Global Citizens (Measure 1.4)	Focuses on eSafety, netiquette, and identifying misinformation. Targets early years to ensure skills are "ingrained" by post-secondary levels.	Banks: Direct application of digital citizenship. Marginson: Alignment of national priorities with EU targets.	Requires a "whole-school approach". Shifts responsibility from individual teachers to a cultural norm.
	Pillar 2: Empowering Educators (Measure 2.1 & 2.2)	Integration of digital literacy into school development plans. Reflective use of tools like SELFIE to monitor readiness.	Glonacal: Local implementation of global teacher standards.	Critique: Lacks clarity on whether it applies to subject specialists (e.g., Biology) or just ICT teachers.
	Pillar 3 & 4: Community & Resources	Workshops for parents (Measure 3.1) to identify addiction/isolation. "One Device per Child" to ensure equity.	Banks: Inclusive participation.	Reduces digital divides that cause stress. Bridges the "school-home" gap for wellbeing.
BeSmartOnline! Public Report (2022-2024) (BeSmartOnline, 2025)	Youth Agency & Support	Involvement of Youth Ambassadors to co-design campaigns. Outreach in post-secondary institutions (cyberbullying, sexting, grooming).	Banks: Student agency and active participation.	Demonstrates the value of "participatory approaches," in which students help shape the safety policies they follow.
	Helpline Data Analysis	Empirical record of 1763 interventions: Suicide-related (23.3%), Harmful content (22.8%), Cyberbullying (18.9%).	Marginson: Global risks manifesting in local psychological crises.	Provides SLTs with "hard evidence" of student vulnerability to justify urgent wellbeing interventions.
National Cybersecurity Strategy 2023-2026 (Ministry for the Economy, European Funds and Lands, 2023).	Domain 3: Cyber Competence & Culture	Focuses on "Cyber Hygiene". Explicitly states awareness is a behavioural concern for all disciplines, not just ICT.	Banks: Ethical and responsible digital conduct.	Mandates SLTs to normalise safe online behaviour across all learning environments, not just tech labs.

2.2.2. Portugal's National Policies

Portugal's approach reflects a strong commitment to equity, digital inclusion, and gender representation in STEM pathways. Initiatives such as SeguraNet (2025) illustrate the localisation of European digital safety frameworks within practical school toolkits. Nevertheless, implementation appears partly dependent on event-based awareness campaigns and decentralised initiatives. This suggests that while preventive discourse is present, sustained integration into everyday pedagogy may vary. The Portuguese case highlights the tension between policy aspiration and school implementation, a dynamic consistent with Marginson's (2022) observation that global digital agendas often outpace systemic adaptation at the local level.

Table 6 summarises how Portugal embeds wellbeing within citizenship and inclusion initiatives.

Table 6. Summarised analysis of Portugal's national policy frameworks.

Portugal's Documents	Key Strategy/ Measure	Detailed Focus & Provisions	Theoretical Alignment	Implications for SLTs & Wellbeing
Digital Strategy 2030 (Republica Portuguesa, 2025)	People Dimension & STEM	Revising curricula for digital safety. Mentoring for "Girls in STEM" to counter gender gaps.	Banks: Inclusion, gender equity, and participatory citizenship.	SLTs are tasked with translating these goals into practice with limited centralised wellbeing guidelines.
SeguraNet (Safer Internet Centre) (Seguranet, 2025)	Awareness & Training	National "Safer Internet Day" competitions. Teacher training aligned with DigCompEdu.	Glonacal: Localisation of EU BIK+ frameworks into school toolkits.	Most practical "school-level" model analysed. Provides helplines for reactive support and training for prevention.
BIK Policy Monitor Country Profile 2025 (BIK, 2025a)	Risk Identification	Identifies sextortion, grooming, and online dependency as key national risks.	Banks: Attempt to foster critical literacy and ethical participation.	Finds that interventions are often "fragmented" and depend on the initiative of individual school leaders.

2.2.3. Italy's National Policies

Italy's framework is characterised by a comparatively robust legal architecture addressing cyberbullying and digital misconduct. Legislative clarity provides formal protection mechanisms and establishes clear boundaries of accountability. However, the prominence of regulatory instruments may position digital wellbeing primarily within a compliance-based paradigm. While staff training and competence development are acknowledged, psychosocial dimensions are less centrally articulated within policy discourse. This suggests a model in which digital risk is conceptualised primarily as a legal or infrastructural issue rather than as an integrated educational leadership challenge. From a citizenship education perspective, this may limit opportunities for preventive, reflective engagement envisioned by

Banks (2020).

Table 7 summarises Italy's framework, which is largely regulatory, prioritising digital competence and legislative measures.

Table 7. Summarised analysis of Italy's national policy frameworks.

Italy's Documents	Key Strategy/ Measure	Detailed Focus & Provisions	Theoretical Alignment	Implications for SLTs & Wellbeing
Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale (PNSD) (Ministry of Education, 2022)	Infrastructure & Learning Spaces	Redesigning classrooms into "flexible, inclusive environments" (Action 4). High-speed connectivity as a "right".	Marginson: National response to OECD benchmarks for global competitiveness.	Technology is used to foster social inclusion and accessibility for students with disabilities.
	Competencies & Staff Training	Focus on "transversal skills" like critical thinking and computational logic. Whole-staff training for methodological innovation.	Banks: Critical engagement and ethical participation in digital flows.	Recognises that student resilience depends on the confidence and competence of the *entire* staff.
Fabbisogni di Alfabetizzazione Mediatica (AGCOM, 2025)	Risk Perception & Trust	Maps inequality in parental mediation. Identifies a low level of trust in schools to handle digital dangers.	Glonacal: Global content penetrating local families who lack the tools to regulate it.	Schools must act as "compensatory spaces" where students get the guidance they don't receive at home.
BIK Policy Monitor Country Profile 2025 (European Commission, 2026)	Pillars of Protection & Empowerment	Law 71/2017 & 70/2024: Legal definitions of cyberbullying. Codice Rosso: Criminalising image abuse.	Marginson: National legal alignment with the EU Digital Services Act.	Strong legal safety net, but SLTs may find it reactive rather than providing preventive pedagogical tools.

2.2.4. Cyprus' National Policies

Cyprus demonstrates robust alignment with European digital agendas, particularly in relation to access and digital rights. However, the translation of these high-level commitments into concrete, school-level wellbeing practices appears limited, highlighting a gap between strategic intent and pedagogical implementation. (Table 8)

Across the four contexts, psychological risks associated with global online exposure demonstrate consistent themes: anxiety, depressive symptoms, body dissatisfaction, addictive behaviours, and reduced emotional regulation. Although prevalence rates vary, the overall pattern suggests that digital environments increasingly intersect with adolescent identity formation and mental health. While

national policies acknowledge these concerns, the dominant framing often situates them within public health or cybersecurity discourse rather than pedagogical development. This distinction is significant, as it shapes whether schools are positioned as preventive environments or reactive support mechanisms. This is particularly relevant given evidence that digital wellbeing initiatives are most effective when embedded within whole-school frameworks that integrate curriculum, pastoral care, and teacher professional development (OECD, 2021).

Table 8. Summarised analysis of cyprus's national policy frameworks.

Cyprus Documents	Key Strategy/ Measure	Detailed Focus & Provisions	Theoretical Alignment	Implications for SLTs & Wellbeing
National Action Plan for Digital Skills 2021-2025 (Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy, 2020)	Infrastructure & Subsidies	Upgrading connectivity and providing hardware subsidies for low-income students.	Banks: Equitable access as a foundation for digital citizenship.	Aims to reduce the "digital divide" to prevent social marginalisation and stress.
BIK Policy Monitor Country Profile 2025 (BIK, 2025b)	Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids	Explicit recognition of children's digital rights. Alignment with BIK+ EU frameworks.	Glonacal: Filtration of EU norms into national cybersecurity strategies.	Provides a high-level mandate but lacks "actionable guidelines" for post-secondary leadership.
Youth Internet & Social Media Addiction Survey (Alexander Research Centre, 2020)	Empirical Risk Mapping	Found 8.3% addiction rate and 24% problematic use. 17% reported negative effects on academic performance.	Marginson: Global platforms causing local academic and psychological decline.	Highlights a deficiency in "critical digital engagement". Proves the need for school-based coping strategies.

2.3. Part 3: Empirical Research on the Psychological, Social, and Academic Dimensions of Student Wellbeing in Digital Contexts

2.3.1. Psychological Wellbeing

Late adolescence represents a critical developmental stage in which identity formation, peer validation, and autonomy intersect with digital environments, intensifying both opportunities and vulnerabilities (WHO Europe, 2024). Psychological wellbeing refers to emotional stability, self-esteem, and resilience within digital environments. Research consistently demonstrates that global online exposure influences adolescent mental health (WHO, 2024). Highly visual and emotionally stimulating content can contribute to anxiety, depression, body dissatisfaction, and risky behaviours (Livingstone et al., 2022).

Recent research highlights that educators often feel underprepared to address

the psychosocial dimensions of students' digital engagement, particularly in relation to emerging risks such as algorithmic content exposure and online identity formation (Livingstone et al., 2022). This gap is particularly significant at post-secondary level, where educators are expected to respond to complex student needs without always receiving specialised training.

Table 9 presents some evidence of lowered self-esteem, negative mood, psychosomatic symptoms, and perceived addiction.

Table 9. Content risks of global online media and their implications.

Source and Year	Population/Sample	Key Findings
Malta (Portelli, 2024)	150 Maltese university students	46.2% admitted experiencing psychological difficulties after actively seeking pornography.
Malta (Azzopardi, 2024)	After covering several court arraignments related to the possession and distribution of child pornography, *MaltaToday* contacted the police to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and to explore whether emerging technologies are influencing trends.	The Cyber Crime Unit handled 1145 such cases in 2024, up from 1094 in 2023 and 647 in 2022.
Malta (Fenech, 2022)	6 Maltese university students (qualitative study).	Exposure to sexualised images by influencers on Instagram was associated with negative mood, reduced self-esteem, and increased body dissatisfaction.
Italy HBSC (n.d.)	Study conducted by Istituto Superiore di Sanità among 4525 Italian students from Northern Italy aged 7 - 19 years.	41% of Italian adolescents reported rising problematic internet use, identified as a significant predictor of psychosomatic complaints (e.g., headaches, irritability, sleep disturbances).
Cyprus (Alexander Research Centre, 2020)	HBSC study conducted in Cyprus among 1059 high-school and university students.	8.3% reported feeling "addicted" to social networking sites and 24% were at high risk of psychological problems linked to problematic internet use.

National policies recognise these concerns to varying degrees. *Malta's Digital Education Strategy 2024-2030* (MEYR, 2024) and *National Cybersecurity Strategy* (MITA, 2023) explicitly warn against digital dependency and harmful content. *BeSmartOnline*! (2024) reports recurring cases involving suicide-related and self-harm material. *Portugal's Digital Strategy 2030* (Republica Portuguesa, 2025) similarly links online comparison and screen dependency to stress and anxiety. In Italy, the *Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni* [AGCOM] (2025) documents widespread exposure to harmful content, while the *Better Internet for Kids profile* (2025b) highlights psychological consequences of cyberbullying and im-

age-based abuse. In Cyprus, the Alexander Research Centre (2020) reports that 8.3% of young people display signs of internet addiction, with 17% experiencing academic decline due to overuse. Hence, while psychological risks are acknowledged, policy emphasis ranges from preventive strategies (Malta, Portugal) to regulatory or descriptive reporting (Italy, Cyprus).

2.3.2. Social Wellbeing

Social wellbeing encompasses belonging, interpersonal relationships, and safe digital interaction. While online platforms facilitate connection and cultural exchange (Selwyn, 2016), they also expose young people to a wide variety of online harm (OECD, 2024) as summarised in **Table 10**.

Table 10. Online harm affecting students.

Country	Source	Study	Key Findings
Malta	Grech & Lauri (2022)	Maltese compulsory school students	30% of cyberbullying victims reported suicidal ideation compared to 8% of non-victims; 18% of victims reported self-harm.
	BeSmartOnline! (2025)	Maltese Safer Internet Centre helpline data (2022-2024, n = 1763 interventions)	23.3% suicide-related issues; 22.8% harmful online content; 18.9% cyberbullying; 5.5% e-crime; 4% grooming; 0.8% sextortion.
	Dimech (2025)	Local news interview with Anna Maria Vella, Clinical Director of Aġenzija Sedqa	Reported cases of Maltese adolescents wearing nappies to avoid interrupting prolonged online gaming sessions.
	Calleja (2024)	Maltese teenage girls (national study)	Ranked among the highest in Europe for social media addiction.
Italy	Italy (ISTAT, 2025)	National survey of adolescents (ages 11 - 19)	34% experienced online harassment in the past year; 7.8% reported monthly harassment; girls were particularly at risk.
	HBSC Italia (2024)	17-year-old adolescents	12.6% of girls versus 6.7% of boys were at risk of problematic internet use.
	Marengo et al. (2021)	Italian adolescents (literature evidence)	Gender disparities linked to the use of highly visual platforms (e.g., Instagram), amplifying peer comparison, body dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms.
Portugal	Matos et al. (2018)	3525 students across 23 schools	7.6% reported being victims of cyberbullying in the past year; 3.9% admitted perpetrating cyberbullying.
	Melo et al. (2025)	Portuguese students	30.9% overall involvement in cyberbullying; 34.9% reported victimisation in the last 3 months
	Durkee et al. (2016); Smahel et al. (2020)	Portuguese adolescents (cross-European studies)	Between 4% and 8% demonstrate problematic internet use.
	Zendle et al. (2019)	Adolescents (European samples, including Portugal)	Exposure to consumer risks such as online gambling and gambling-like features in games (e.g., loot boxes).
Cyprus	EU Kids Online Cyprus (2014) (EU Kids Online Network, 2014)	Children aged 11 - 16 (national survey)	20% reported exposure to harmful user-generated content; 13% to hate messages; 12% to thin-ideal discussions; 6% to drug-related content; 31% of girls aged 14 - 16 exposed to thin-ideal content.
	Smahel et al. (2020)	Adolescents (EU Kids Online, 19 countries including Cyprus)	High levels of exposure to harmful content and unwanted sexual connections among Cypriot adolescents.
	Better Internet for Kids (2025b)	Cyprus Country Profile	Sexting, sextortion, and cyberbullying are identified as major concerns; digital citizenship is integrated into the curriculum, though monitoring systems remain underdeveloped.

Although all four countries recognise social risks, strategies are often reactive. Malta emphasises data monitoring and reporting; Italy relies on legislative instruments such as Law 71/2017 and Law 69/2019 (Government of Malta, 2018); Cyprus focuses on awareness through *Better Internet for Kids* initiatives (BIK, 2025b); and Portugal promotes prevention via SeguraNet (2025). However, wellbeing initiatives frequently remain confined to ICT domains, limiting whole-school integration. This fragmentation underscores the need for systemic, interdisciplinary leadership consistent with Banks' (2020) model of ethical digital citizenship.

2.3.3. Academic Wellbeing

Academic wellbeing refers to sustained motivation, concentration, and academic progression (Livingstone et al., 2022). While digital tools enhance learning opportunities, they also introduce consumer risks, including compulsive gaming, online gambling, and impulsive digital behaviours (OECD, 2024).

In Malta, reports highlight problematic gaming and social media use among post-secondary youth. *The Malta Gaming Authority* (Xace, 2023) identifies 18 to 24-year-olds as highly active in online gaming, while Dimech (2025) documents extreme gaming behaviours. The *Times of Malta* (Calleja, 2024) reports high levels of social media addiction among Maltese teenage girls. These trends suggest diminished academic focus and resilience.

In Portugal, gambling-like mechanisms in video games, such as loot boxes, are associated with risky behaviours that interfere with study routines (Zendle et al., 2019). Italy's policy framework remains skills-oriented, prioritising digital competence with limited reference to psychological or academic consequences. In Cyprus, although evidence links internet overuse to academic underperformance, policy responses remain largely reactive.

In all countries, the academic dimension of digital wellbeing receives inconsistent attention. While digital innovation is widely promoted, fewer policies explicitly address its implications for concentration, motivation, and sustained learning. This gap in educator preparedness provides an important lens for interpreting how policy expectations are enacted within classroom practice, particularly in post-secondary contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an interpretivist qualitative design, recognising educational practices and digital wellbeing as socially constructed and context-dependent phenomena (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell, 2013). A qualitative sequential exploratory approach was used. First, national digital education and cybersecurity policy documents were analysed. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with educators. The aim was to examine how national policy discourse is interpreted and enacted at school level. The study seeks contextual insight rather than statistical generalisation.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the research unit within the IDEA College in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines governing research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in reporting, and all identifiable information was removed from transcripts. Data were securely stored in accordance with GDPR requirements.

3.2. Participants and Data Collection

12 educators participated in the study (three from each of four countries: Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and Portugal). All were working in post-secondary schools serving students aged approximately 16 - 18. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling during a shared professional development course, which facilitated access and initial rapport; however, it did not form part of the dataset.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and were conducted on the last day of the one-week course. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. A common interview guide consisting of 12 open-ended questions explored perceptions of national digital policies, school-level implementation, leadership strategies, teacher preparedness, and observed student challenges. All interviews were conducted in English, as participants had professional fluency. Clarifications were addressed during the interviews, and transcripts were anonymised, as recommended by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and Braun & Clarke (2022). Participants were offered a transcript review to ensure accuracy.

Table 11 presents a concise participant profile to support interpretation and transferability of findings.

Table 11. Participant profile across four national contexts.

Participant (P)	Country	Role	Subject Area	Years of Experience	School Type
P1	Malta	Teacher	Biology	15	Post-Secondary
P2	Malta	Teacher	English	12	Post-Secondary
P3	Malta	Teacher	ICT/Computing	10	Post-Secondary
P4	Italy	Teacher	Biology	18	Liceo Superiore
P5	Italy	Teacher	English	14	Liceo Superiore
P6	Italy	Teacher	ICT/Computing	11	Liceo Superiore
P7	Cyprus	Teacher	Biology	16	Lykeio
P8	Cyprus	Teacher	English	13	Lykeio
P9	Cyprus	Teacher	ICT/Digital Studies	9	Lykeio
P10	Portugal	Teacher	Biology	17	Ensino Secundário
P11	Portugal	Teacher	Languages	12	Ensino Secundário
P12	Portugal	Teacher	ICT/Technology	8	Ensino Secundário

This variation in subject specialisation and professional experience provided a range of perspectives on how digital wellbeing is interpreted and enacted across different disciplinary contexts.

In parallel, national policy documents from each country were analysed to identify how digital wellbeing is framed at strategic level. These findings informed and contextualised the interview analysis.

3.3. Reflexivity

The researcher is Maltese and works within a post-secondary context. This positionality provided contextual understanding but required careful reflexive attention. Reflexive journalling was conducted after each interview to document assumptions, emerging interpretations, and potential bias. During coding, particular care was taken not to privilege the Maltese context due to familiarity, as recommended by Creswell (2013), and Cohen et al. (2018). Cross-national comparison supported analytical distance by requiring that themes be grounded in participants' accounts rather than in prior professional experience.

3.4. Data Analysis

Policy documents were purposively selected based on their relevance to national digital education, cybersecurity, and student wellbeing strategies within each country. Three key documents per country were analysed (see **Table 4**), guided by inclusion criteria prioritising recent (post-2020), government-endorsed frameworks with explicit reference to digital practices and/or student wellbeing. These documents were examined using thematic coding to identify policy priorities, implementation mechanisms, and references to psychological, social, and academic wellbeing.

The study adopted a sequential exploratory qualitative design, whereby policy analysis informed the development of the interview focus and provided a contextual framework for interpreting educators' perspectives within broader national discourses. Accordingly, policy findings were first analysed independently and later integrated with interview data through comparative synthesis to identify areas of alignment, divergence, and policy-practice tension.

Interview data were analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, selected for its alignment with an interpretivist epistemology and its recognition of the researcher's active role in knowledge construction. Analysis followed six recursive phases: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Early coding captured semantic patterns such as regulatory responses, delegation to ICT departments, and teacher uncertainty. Subsequent interpretive coding enabled the development of higher-order themes, including institutional compartmentalisation and policy-practice gaps.

Throughout the analytical process, policy and interview datasets were treated as distinct but complementary sources. Their integration enabled a deeper examination of structural relationships between policy framing, school-level practices,

and perceived student outcomes. Themes were refined based on their explanatory power rather than frequency, and a thematic map was developed to illustrate connections across levels of analysis.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Limitations

Credibility was strengthened through triangulation between policy and interview data, transcript verification, and iterative coding, as recommended by Robson & McCartan (2016). An audit trail documented analytical decisions. Reflexive journalling supported confirmability. Detailed contextual description enhances transferability.

The study is based on a small, non-random sample and does not represent national systems. Participants shared involvement in a professional development context, which may shape perspectives. However, the comparative design provides analytical depth across four institutional settings (**Figure 2**).

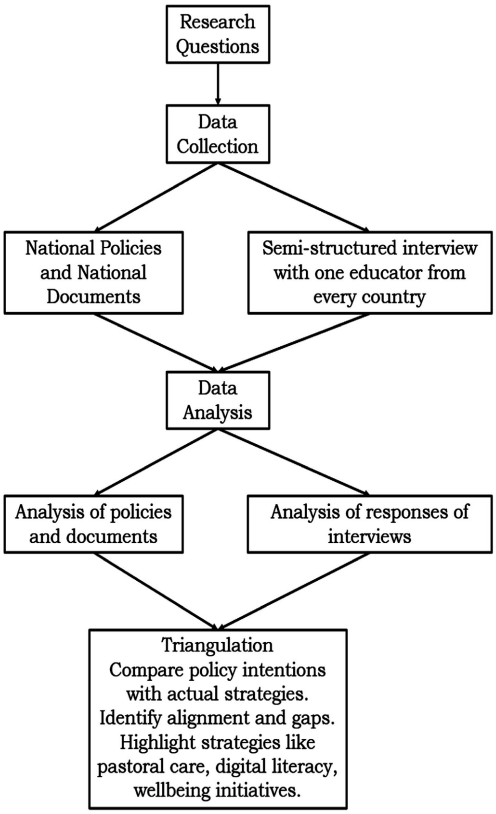

Figure 2. The research process.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings in relation to the two research questions: 1) how national education policy frameworks respond to digital-related wellbeing risks, and 2) how educators experience and respond to these concerns within their school settings. Document analysis provided contextual understanding of policy

orientations across the four countries. These findings are then integrated with themes generated through reflexive thematic analysis of interviews conducted with 12 educators (three from each country).

Across all four national contexts, participants acknowledged that digital wellbeing is recognised at policy level. However, strong similarities emerged in how educators described the translation of policy into practice. Despite differences in legislative structure and national priorities, the lived experiences reported by educators were strikingly convergent.

Five themes were identified.

4.1. Theme 1: Reactive and Regulatory Measures—Restricting Mobile Phone Use during Lessons

Across Malta, Italy, Portugal, and Cyprus, all participating educators emphasised that they actively attempt to guide students towards critical and responsible engagement with global online content as proposed by the national policies. Participants described efforts to encourage students to question misinformation, recognise scams, exercise caution in online communication, evaluate digital sources critically, and use artificial intelligence tools responsibly. Several educators referred to occasional awareness sessions, workshops, or thematic activities organised at school level to promote online safety and digital responsibility.

A Maltese educator explained:

"We try to teach them to think before they believe what they see online, to check sources and not trust everything that appears on social media" (Maltese educator 2).

Similarly, a Portuguese participant noted:

"We speak about scams, about who they are talking to, about protecting their privacy. We try to make them more aware" (Portuguese educator 3).

An Italian educator added:

"We discuss artificial intelligence and how it should support learning, not replace their own thinking" (Italian educator 1).

Despite these proactive intentions, the most consistently reported school-level response across all four contexts was the regulation of mobile phone use during lessons. Participants repeatedly described policies that restrict, confiscate, or collect devices at classroom entry or at the beginning of the school day. They also said that they have no control over students who use tablets or laptops and scroll online during classwork. Educators frequently described these measures as regulatory rather than educational. They were seen as necessary for maintaining classroom focus, yet insufficient to address broader digital wellbeing concerns.

4.2. Theme 2: Students Are Frequently More Familiar with Rapidly Evolving Online Content Than Some Staff

A strong and recurring similarity across all four countries was educators' perception that students are more familiar with emerging digital platforms and online

trends than many teachers are.

A Portuguese educator reflected:

"Many teachers may not be frequent users of platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, restricting their understanding of students' digital realities." (Portuguese educator 2)

Italian educators described a similar dynamic:

"Students are always ahead. By the time we understand one platform, they have already moved to another" (Italian educator 2).

A Cypriot participant similarly stated:

"They know much more than us about what is happening online. We find out about trends only after problems arise" (Cyprus educator 1).

Across contexts, this perceived generational and experiential divide contributed to a sense that responses were often reactive. Educators expressed concern that limited familiarity with rapidly evolving digital cultures constrained their capacity to intervene confidently or proactively.

The similarity of this perception across participants suggests that this is not a country-specific phenomenon but a shared professional experience.

4.3. Theme 3: Online Harm Often Occurs beyond School Hours and Is Perceived as Outside Educators' Direct Control

Participants across all four countries emphasised that many digital-related wellbeing issues originate outside school hours, limiting the school's control.

A Portuguese educator remarked:

"What can we educators do? We have no power over how students spend their time after school hours" (Portuguese educator 3).

Similarly, a Cypriot participant explained:

"Most problems happen at night or during weekends. By the time it reaches school, the damage is already done", referring mostly to cyberbullying and fights (Cyprus educator 3).

An Italian educator observed:

"We deal with the consequences in school, but the exposure happens beyond" (Italian educator 3).

A Maltese educator echoed this perspective:

"We try to guide them, but we cannot monitor what they are exposed to once they leave school" (Maltese educator 1).

This theme emerged consistently across all interviews. Educators described their role as responsive rather than preventive regarding digital harm. Sextortion cases, cyberbullying incidents, exposure to extreme ideologies, and excessive gaming were frequently described as originating in unsupervised online environments. The cross-national similarity in this perception was notable. Despite different policy frameworks, educators in all four contexts described the boundaries of school authority as a significant limitation in addressing digital-related wellbeing concerns.

4.4. Theme 4: Teachers Face Limited Time and Expertise While Delivering Extensive High-Stakes Syllabi

Across the four countries, educators consistently referred to time pressures associated with high-stakes curricula as a significant constraint.

A Maltese educator stated:

"Most teachers focus primarily on completing their syllabus and integrate online safety only peripherally. We do not always have time" (Maltese educator 1).

A Cypriot educator explained:

"Digital wellbeing is important, but it may be the case that academic content takes priority" (Cyprus educator 2).

This convergence across all four countries indicates that workload and expertise constraints are widely shared professional experiences rather than isolated contextual challenges.

4.5. Theme 5: Digital Wellbeing Requires Sustained Professional Development That Is Realistic about Educators' Workload

Although constraints are described, educators across the Maltese, Italian, Portuguese, and Cypriot contexts consistently emphasised the need for structured, ongoing professional development centred on the psychosocial aspects of digital technology. While national documents refer to digital competence and citizenship, participants expressed uncertainty about how to address sensitive issues such as sextortion, online radicalisation, or compulsive gaming within subject lessons.

A Cypriot participant stated:

"We need proper training on how digital behaviour affects mental health. Not just how to use tools" (Cyprus educator 1).

A Maltese educator added:

"Any new initiative must respect our workload. Otherwise, it becomes another pressure" (Maltese educator 3).

Findings reveal a general agreement that digital wellbeing cannot rely solely on device restriction or awareness campaigns. Educators expressed willingness to engage with deeper training, provided it is sustained, practically relevant, and integrated realistically within existing professional responsibilities.

Despite differences in policy structures, educators shared similar perceptions regarding the need for ongoing professional development that addresses both technological and psychosocial aspects of digital engagement.

5. Discussion

Across the four countries, national documents broadly align with European agendas that emphasise digital competence, safer internet practices, and students' digital rights (European Commission, 2022, 2025c). Yet, the findings demonstrate that educators' day-to-day responses remain shaped by local institutional constraints and by the borderless nature of digital environments. This reinforces the

need to conceptualise digital wellbeing not only as a safeguarding concern but as a core educational and developmental priority within post-secondary education.

5.1. Policy Convergence, but Uneven Operational Specificity

A first contribution of the study is its cross-contextual confirmation that policy rhetoric is broadly convergent while operational clarity is uneven. The policy landscape across all four contexts reflects glonacal influence: global platform risks and EU-level priorities filter into national strategies and school governance expectations (Marginson, 2022). *Malta's Digital Education Strategy* explicitly promotes nurturing global citizens and endorses whole-school approaches to digital safety and citizenship (MEYR, 2024), while *Malta's National Cybersecurity Strategy* frames cyber competence as behavioural and cross-disciplinary (MITA, 2023). Portugal's national agenda similarly foregrounds digital inclusion and citizenship, complemented by school-facing supports through *SeguraNet* (Republica Portuguesa, 2025; SeguraNet, 2025). Italy's framework is strengthened by legal and regulatory provisions addressing cyberbullying and related harms (e.g., Law-based protections highlighted in national documentation), alongside competence-oriented digital schooling reforms (AGCOM, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2022). Cyprus' policy emphasis on digital skills and EU alignment is evident, with empirical evidence of problematic use present in national survey work (Alexander Research Centre, 2020; European Commission, 2025a).

However, the study's findings suggest that many policy instruments remain high-level, leaving educators without consistent, actionable guidance on how to embed psychosocial digital wellbeing within subject teaching, particularly in high-stakes post-secondary settings. This is consistent with broader international evidence that while policy frameworks increasingly recognise online risk typologies and wellbeing concerns, institutional enactment often struggles to keep pace with rapidly evolving digital realities (OECD, 2021, 2024). The cross-national similarity in educators' accounts, therefore, does not simply reflect local school issues; it points to a systemic challenge in translating macro policy ambitions into meso-level leadership routines and micro-level pedagogy.

5.2. The Dominance of Regulatory Responses as "Visible" Governance

The first theme presented reactive and regulatory measures, particularly restricting mobile phone use during lessons. This elicits reflections on a form of "visible governance" that schools can enact immediately within their jurisdiction. Restriction is an administratively legible intervention: it is easy to communicate, monitor, and justify to stakeholders when digital distraction and online harms are salient concerns. This aligns with a wider tendency for institutional responses to prioritise controllable, classroom-bound levers when digital risks are perceived as urgent yet difficult to address comprehensively (OECD, 2024).

Yet, the reliance on restriction also signals a mismatch between the policy aspi-

ration of embedding digital wellbeing across subjects and the practical realities of implementation. Banks' (2020) framework implies that digital citizenship requires sustained cultivation of critical thinking, ethical reflection, and participatory responsibility. These capacities cannot be developed primarily through prohibition. Where schools rely heavily on restrictions, digital wellbeing becomes framed as behavioural compliance rather than as an educational competence and ethical disposition (Zammit, 2023b). This risks narrowing digital citizenship to "risk avoidance" rather than supporting the more reflective engagement that Banks (2017, 2020) proposes.

Importantly, the educators' acknowledgement that schools do run occasional awareness activities indicates professional intent and care; however, sporadic events may struggle to deliver the cumulative learning required for durable critical literacy. National frameworks that stress whole-school responsibility (e.g., MEYR, 2024; MITA, 2023; SeguraNet, 2025) would therefore benefit from clearer guidance on how awareness initiatives connect to ongoing curriculum routines, subject pedagogies, and assessment pressures.

5.3. Digital Asymmetry and Shifting Pedagogical Authority

The second theme that targets students as being more familiar with rapidly evolving online content than some staff, highlights a form of digital asymmetry that affects pedagogical authority and safeguarding confidence. This finding resonates with research showing that adolescents' platform use and online social practices can outpace adults' familiarity, especially when platforms are highly dynamic and algorithmically driven (Livingstone et al., 2022). Such asymmetry does not imply educator deficit; rather, it reflects the speed and opacity of digital ecosystems, where trends, affordances, and risk exposures can change quickly.

From a glonacal standpoint, this asymmetry is predictable: global platform architectures and content flows evolve outside national education systems' training cycles and outside school leaders' immediate control (Marginson, 2022). The result is that educators may experience a lag between emerging online realities and institutional readiness. Policy commitments to digital competence may therefore be necessary but insufficient unless they explicitly encompass psychosocial and safeguarding literacy on how online environments shape identity development, social comparison, emotional regulation, and risk-taking (Livingstone et al., 2022; WHO Europe, 2024). In this regard, the study reinforces the argument that "digital competence" should be understood as more than technical fluency; it must include interpretive and wellbeing-related expertise.

5.4. The Jurisdictional Boundary Problem: Harm beyond School Hours

The third theme revolves around online harm occurring outside school hours and being perceived as beyond educators' direct control. This exposes a central governance dilemma. Schools are held publicly responsible for student wellbe-

ing, yet key drivers of digital harm occur in private, borderless spaces governed by commercial platform logics and home supervision patterns. The OECD's typology of online risks underlines that digital harms are not confined to school settings and often involve interpersonal dynamics, exposure risks, and conduct risks that unfold in out-of-school contexts (OECD, 2021). Similarly, evidence linking problematic use with psychological distress underscores that risk pathways frequently intensify outside formal school hours (Cai et al., 2023; WHO Europe, 2024).

This is precisely where Marginson's (2022) glonacal lens is most explanatory: global digital flows penetrate local adolescent life in ways that are only partially regulatable through national policy and only partially governable through schools. Policy strategies that place responsibility largely on schools without parallel supports for families, community services, and platform accountability may inadvertently intensify educators' sense of limited control. Malta's BeSmartOnline! model, particularly its helpline and multi-sectoral orientation, illustrates a broader ecosystem approach that begins to address this boundary problem by linking education to broader safeguarding infrastructure (BeSmartOnline!, 2022). Portugal's *SeguraNet* similarly provides helplines and toolkits that extend beyond classroom teaching (SeguraNet, 2025). The study's findings suggest that such ecosystem supports are likely to be especially important at post-secondary level, where subject specialisation and academic pressures can reduce the time available for extended wellbeing teaching.

5.5. Curriculum Compression and the Wellbeing-Performance Tension

The fourth theme focuses on limited time and expertise under extensive high-stakes syllabi, highlighting a familiar structural tension in post-secondary education: academic accountability pressures can compress the space for cross-cutting wellbeing work. Even when national frameworks endorse whole-school digital citizenship, subject teachers may experience digital wellbeing as an "additional demand" competing with examinable content. This is consistent with international evidence that wellbeing agendas are often squeezed by performance-oriented systems, particularly where assessment stakes are high (OECD, 2017, 2024).

This finding has two implications. First, policy language advocating cross-curricular digital wellbeing requires an implementation design that respects workload realities and clarifies how digital wellbeing can be embedded without becoming a bolt-on. Malta's policy emphasis on whole-school culture and reflective tools (e.g., SELFIE) could be strengthened by specifying subject-integrated exemplars and minimal viable routines for non-ICT teachers (MEYR, 2024). Second, professional development should not merely increase expectations; it must provide time-efficient pedagogical strategies that align with the logic of high-stakes curricula. Otherwise, responsibility risks being informally delegated to a narrow set of staff, undermining the whole-school aspiration.

5.6. Professional Development as the Missing Implementation Infrastructure

The fifth theme, digital wellbeing, necessitates ongoing professional development that tackles psychosocial dimensions while remaining realistic about workload, and identifies what can be seen as missing "implementation infrastructure". Across the four contexts, educators did not reject the policy direction; rather, they called for the capacity-building mechanisms needed to enact it. This aligns with Banks' (2020) emphasis on educators' role in cultivating ethical and critical citizenship. If teachers are expected to develop students' critical digital literacy, safeguard awareness, and promote responsible AI use, then teachers require structured learning opportunities that address not only tools and compliance but also the psychosocial and developmental dimensions. This concurs with what Gatt (2024) reported in his studies conducted with teachers, counsellors, and guidance teachers in Maltese secondary schools.

Existing evidence supports the need for this shift. Research synthesising the links between adolescent digital engagement and psychological outcomes indicates that risks are often mediated through social comparison, emotional arousal, sleep disruption, and peer dynamics (Cai et al., 2023; Livingstone et al., 2022; WHO Europe, 2024). These mechanisms are pedagogically relevant: they affect attention, motivation, classroom relationships, and resilience. The study therefore reinforces the value of professional development that integrates 1) critical digital literacy, 2) safeguarding and risk response pathways, and 3) adolescent psychosocial development, delivered in ways that are feasible in post-secondary settings.

Policy documents already gesture towards training and whole-school responsibility, but they vary in practical specificity. Portugal's *SeguraNet* stands out for providing teacher-facing resources and structured supports (SeguraNet, 2025), while Malta's strategies emphasise whole-school orientation and national coordination (MEYR, 2024; BeSmartOnline!, 2022). Italy's policy ecosystem combines infrastructure reforms and legal protections, yet educators may require more explicit pedagogical guidance for preventive wellbeing work beyond compliance (AGCOM, 2025; European Commission, 2025b). Cyprus' EU-aligned frameworks and national digital skills planning could similarly benefit from clearer school-level guidance on psychosocial dimensions, building on the local evidence base of problematic use (Alexander Research Centre, 2020; European Commission, 2025a). Across contexts, the study suggests that professional development is the key mediating mechanism through which policy ambition can become consistent classroom practice.

5.7. Cross-National Similarity as an Analytical Signal

A notable feature of the findings is the high degree of similarity across educators in four different national systems. While the sample does not allow for system-level generalisation, this convergence is analytically meaningful: it suggests that educators are confronting common challenges arising from the shared architec-

ture of global digital platforms and comparable institutional constraints (e.g., curriculum intensity, limited time, boundary issues beyond school). In glonacal terms, the global layer exerts a strong shaping influence on local experience, even when national policy orientations differ (Marginson, 2022). This helps explain why educators across contexts described similar pressures and adopted similar "controllable" responses (e.g., phone restriction). It also strengthens the argument that policy solutions may need to focus less on isolated national initiatives and more on scalable implementation supports that recognise shared structural conditions.

5.8. Implications for Policy and School Leadership

These findings imply that strengthening digital wellbeing in post-secondary education requires moving from primarily regulatory classroom controls towards a more integrated, capacity-building approach. This does not mean abandoning restrictions, which may be useful for attention and classroom management; rather, it means ensuring that restrictions sit within a broader pedagogical strategy oriented towards critical literacy, ethical participation, and psychosocial resilience (Banks, 2020). At policy level, this entails translating whole-school aspirations into subject-integrated guidance, clear response pathways for serious incidents, and workload-sensitive professional development. At the school level, it entails leadership practices that coordinate shared expectations across departments, support staff confidence, and engage parents and community services, especially given that much harm occurs outside school hours (OECD, 2021; BeSmartOnline!, 2022).

5.9. Study Contribution and Boundaries

This study contributes comparative insight into how educators experience the policy-practice interface in relation to digital wellbeing concerns among students aged 16 - 18. Its primary value lies in illuminating convergent professional experiences across four contexts, thereby clarifying where implementation support is most needed. At the same time, the small convenience sample and the shared professional development context mean that findings should be interpreted as contextualised rather than representative. Future research could extend this work through larger comparative samples, inclusion of student perspectives at post-secondary level, and closer examination of how specific professional development models (e.g., SeguraNet-type toolkits or helpline-informed safeguarding approaches) influence routine classroom practice and staff confidence over time.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how national education policy frameworks in Malta, Italy, Cyprus, and Portugal address the wellbeing impacts of global digital media exposure among students aged 16 - 18, and how educators experience and respond to these issues in post-secondary settings. While policy documents across the four contexts show strong alignment with European digital agendas and recognise psy-

chological, social, and academic risks (European Commission, 2022, 2024; OECD, 2021), the findings highlight common challenges including limited time within high-stakes curricula, perceived gaps in digital and psychosocial expertise, and the difficulty of tackling online harms that often occur outside school hours. The strong cross-national similarities in educators' experiences suggest that these challenges are not idiosyncratic to individual systems but reflect shared structural tensions between policy aspiration, institutional capacity, and the realities of contemporary digital ecosystems.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study draws on a small convenience sample of 12 educators who participated in a shared professional development context; therefore, findings cannot be generalised to national systems. Perspectives are limited to educators and do not include students, parents, or policymakers. In addition, policy analysis was confined to selected national documents and may not capture all regional or institutional initiatives. Nonetheless, the comparative design provides analytically meaningful insight into common professional experiences across four European contexts.

Future research could expand the sample size, incorporate student perspectives at post-secondary level, and examine the impact of specific professional development models on teachers' confidence and classroom practice. Longitudinal studies may also explore how sustained training and whole-school strategies influence digital-related wellbeing outcomes over time.

In an increasingly borderless digital environment, enhancing student resilience requires more than just regulatory classroom controls. It demands coherent alignment among national frameworks, school leadership practices, and ongoing educator development, implemented in ways that stay realistic about workload and are responsive to the changing psychosocial landscape of adolescence. Although recent peer-reviewed research was incorporated to strengthen the theoretical framing, further studies focusing specifically on late adolescents and post-secondary school-based digital wellbeing interventions would enhance the evidence base.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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