

COMMENT by K.T. Maran

# Raising digitally resilient citizens

**F**OR young people growing up in Malaysia today, the digital world is not a supplement to life; it is life.

Social interaction, identity formation, learning, entertainment and even political awareness are now shaped by screens, platforms and algorithms. Yet, our education system continues as if digital life exists on the margins, rather than at the centre of young people's daily experience.

While schools prioritise traditional academic subjects, Malaysian students are lacking the most essential skills they need to survive in the digital age: how to protect their mental health online, how to recognise misinformation, how to respond to cyberbullying, how algorithms influence behaviour and how to stay safe from harmful or disturbing content.

This reality gap between what our young are facing and what schools teach is widening every year. While technology is evolving rapidly, social media is evolving even faster. However, our curriculum is barely keeping pace.

## Navigating online spaces

Across Malaysia, students are navigating online spaces filled with intense comparison culture, viral trends, misinformation, online harassment and increasingly aggressive algorithm-driven content.

These risks do not stop at the school gate; they often intensify after school hours, when young people are left alone with their screens.

Many parents and educators are deeply concerned about the rising anxiety, body image issues, cyberbullying and online radicalisation. Yet, these concerns are often addressed reactively – after harm has already occurred – rather than through structured education and prevention.

Students are rarely taught:

- ➔ how social media algorithms decide what they see;
- ➔ how misinformation and disinformation spread;
- ➔ how online comparison affects self-esteem; and

➔ how to critically evaluate online content.

As a result, young people tend to internalise unrealistic standards and harmful narratives without understanding that they are being shaped by systems designed to maximise attention and profit.

Malaysia has seen a growing concern over youth mental health, with increasing reports of anxiety, depression and emotional distress among adolescents. While many factors contribute to this, the influence of unregulated digital environments cannot be ignored.

Social media platforms expose young people to idealised bodies, luxury lifestyles, cosmetic enhancements and viral beauty standards – often without context or education. When these images are repeated daily, especially during formative years, they can profoundly distort self-perception.

This is not about blaming young people for being “too online”; it is about recognising that no previous generation has been exposed to such relentless psychological influence without guidance.

## Equipping teachers with proper tools

Teachers are often the first to notice the effects: declining attention spans, emotional distress, online conflicts spilling into classrooms and students struggling with self-worth. Yet, most teachers have received little formal training in digital well-being, online safety or algorithmic literacy.

We cannot expect educators to manage digital harms without giving them the tools, training and institutional support to do so. This is not a failure of teachers; it is a systemic failure to prepare them for the realities of modern education.

Malaysia proudly positions itself as a digital and innovation-driven economy. We speak of Industry 4.0, AI and the digital workforce of the future. Yet, we invest far more in producing users of technology than in developing critical thinkers who understand how technology shapes behaviour, beliefs and society.

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Young Malaysians should not be shielded from technology but must be taught to understand it. They need the skills to question, navigate and protect themselves within a digital environment. – **AI BY SYED AZAHAR SYED OSMAN/THE SUN**

How can we prepare young Malaysians for the future workforce if they cannot recognise misinformation, deepfake videos or algorithmic manipulation? How can we claim to prioritise mental health while ignoring one of its most powerful influences? How can digital literacy remain an afterthought when digital life is the dominant reality for our youths?

## Prioritising digital well-being

This is not just an education issue; it is a national issue affecting social cohesion, democratic resilience and long-term well-being.

First, digital literacy must be integrated into education from primary school onwards – not as a standalone ICT subject but as a cross-cutting life skill. Students must learn how digital environments influence emotions, beliefs and decision-making.

Second, teachers must be properly trained and supported. Professional development in digital well-being, online safety and media literacy must become a national priority.

Third, technology companies operating in Malaysia must be held

accountable. Platforms that shape young people's lives cannot continue to operate without transparency or responsibility for harm.

Finally, policymakers must acknowledge a simple truth: digital well-being is not optional; it is as essential as a physical health and academic achievement.

Malaysia stands at a crossroads. We can continue to treat digital literacy as a footnote or we can recognise it as a foundation for healthy, informed and resilient citizens.

Young Malaysians should not be shielded from technology but must be taught to understand it. They need the skills to question, navigate and protect themselves within a digital environment.

If we fail to act, we risk leaving an entire generation vulnerable, not because they are unprepared for the future, but because we refused to prepare them for the world they already live in.

It is time for Malaysia's education system to reflect reality; not the past.

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