

Until social-media giants take responsibility for the harm they cause, I support Australia's age ban

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Take this short quiz about your social-media use. Discuss your habits and opinions with your classmates.

1. How often do you use social media?
 - a. several times a day
 - b. once a day
 - c. a few times a week
 - d. rarely or never

2. Which social-media platform do you use the most?
 - a. Facebook
 - b. Instagram
 - c. Twitter / X
 - d. TikTok
 - e. other (please specify) _____

3. How do you usually feel when you use social media?
 - a. happy
 - b. anxious
 - c. entertained
 - d. envious
 - e. informed

4. If social media disappeared, how would you feel?
 - a. less stressed
 - b. disconnected from friends and family
 - c. unsure how to spend my time
 - d. more productive in my daily life
 - e. unaffected

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2 Key words

- a. Write the correct words from the wordpool to match the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

addictive	core	isolated	restriction
ban	doubt	media literacy	threat
confirmation bias	interaction	neutral	viewpoint

- _____ officially forbid an action, activity or item
- _____ not supporting or helping either side in a conflict or disagreement
- _____ a rule or law that limits or controls something
- _____ a feeling of uncertainty or to feel unsure about something
- _____ the central or most important part of something
- _____ a situation where two or more people communicate or react to each other
- _____ causing a strong habit or dependence that is hard to give up
- _____ habits or behaviours to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms someone's existing beliefs
- _____ a statement of an intention to cause harm or damage; a person or thing likely to cause damage or danger
- _____ the ability access, analyse, evaluate and create media in various forms
- _____ a way of thinking about or understanding something; someone's opinion about something
- _____ permission for something to happen; an agreement or approval given for something to happen or be done

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

1. Many schools have decided to _____ phones during class hours to reduce distractions and improve focus.
2. In any relationship, _____ is critical. You should always respect your partner's decisions about their body and boundaries.
3. The _____ nature of social media can result in too much screen time among teenagers, affecting their sleep and study habits.
4. Social-media algorithms often reinforce a person's existing _____, which can limit their exposure to different opinions and perspectives.
5. Some TikTok challenges aren't safe and can be a(n) _____ to teenagers' health and wellbeing.
6. The education authority added lessons on _____ to help students use critical thinking skills while creating and consuming content.
7. Even with hundreds of online friends, some teens feel _____ because they lack meaningful connections outside of social media.
8. It's very easy to take sides. It's much harder to stay _____.

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Chanel Contos
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- 1 I support the Albanese government's proposal for an age ban on social media overall, and surprisingly, so do many young people. A survey of 14- to 29-year-olds found that 42 per cent were positive about the idea, and 25 per cent were neutral. But alone, a ban will not fix the real issue.
- 2 There have always been age restrictions on platforms, and since I signed up for Facebook at age 11, they've been easy to avoid. I doubt this will change as laws will never be able to keep up with digital natives. I am concerned that if teens don't understand why there is a ban and without alternatives to socialise online, this may drive children to deeper parts of the web.
- 3 Meta's announcement of "teen accounts" on Instagram for under-16s is the latest attempt to give parents more control. However, it's unclear whether this will address the core issue, which is algorithms and how they are used against us. Back in 2014, when a sick day meant lots of Instagram scrolling, you would see a message saying "You're all caught up – you've seen all new posts from the past 48 hours." The idea that scrolling could end is now a distant memory. In 2016, Instagram switched from posts shown in chronological order by people you followed to an algorithmic feed based on a user's interactions and engagement.
- 4 In my experience, this is when platforms changed from being a fun way to keep up to date with friends to an addictive platform, working to keep you on the app for as long as possible.
- 5 Algorithms risk harming children by getting them hooked on unlimited fast-paced content. They can affect us all by providing intense confirmation bias of our beliefs. We have seen more hateful and extremist speech online, as well as the spread of misinformation and disinformation – posing a serious threat to democracy. We have all become victims of being more divided. Simultaneously, there has been little to no education about media literacy to stop this.
- 6 This, of course, harms young minds the most. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram know that young men are intrigued by content that expresses frustration with dating and women. It detects this quickly and pushes more extreme and radical viewpoints, reinforcing harmful beliefs. It's hard to separate this community from the online abuse women are subjected to.
- 7 There are many benefits to social media too. The Teach Us Consent campaign began when I posted an Instagram story, which led to mandatory consent education in Australia. The campaign gave many young people a means to use their voice and tell policymakers about their experiences with sexual violence. And for many with difficult or isolated home lives, it is a blessing to have constant access to a community.
- 8 However, anyone who grew up with their own laptop or iPhone knows it was common to come across harmful content on social media. Making this kind of content feel normal demonstrates the scale of harms that can exist on these platforms when unregulated.
- 9 Social-media platforms have long known about the significant harm they cause to their users, particularly young people. Ideally, these platforms would self-regulate to prevent this. But social-media companies know they directly benefit from our anger, differing opinions and the time we spend on their platforms. So until they accept responsibility, I see the government's proposed ban as a small but significant step. If nothing else, it would place social-media platforms on notice. It may also give parents the confidence to restrict when their children are allowed to join a platform, where they will be shaped, for better or for worse.

Chanel Contos is the founder of Teach Us Consent and the author of *Consent Laid Bare*.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What percentage of young people surveyed were positive about the age ban on social media?
2. Why does the author doubt that an age ban alone will solve the core issue with social media?
3. What does the author suggest might drive children to deeper parts of the web?
4. Why did Meta start "teen accounts" on Instagram for under-16s?
5. When did Instagram switch to an algorithmic feed?
6. What does the algorithmic feed prioritise?
7. According to the article, what effect do algorithms have on children?
8. How do these algorithms affect all users negatively?
9. What positive outcome did social media help achieve in Australia?
10. What could the government's social-media age ban do besides directly protecting children?

4 Key language

a. Change these nouns back to their verb form.

1. interaction _____
2. confirmation _____
3. misinformation _____
4. disinformation _____
5. education _____
6. frustration _____

b. Add the suffix *-tion* to the verbs below.

1. regulate _____
2. prevent _____
3. demonstrate _____
4. addict _____

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c. Choose two words with the suffix *-tion* from part a or b. Write a personalised sentence for each one.

1. _____

2. _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Young people cannot live without the internet."
- "Algorithms have made social media unhealthy and addictive."
- "Social-media companies have a responsibility to protect people's safety and wellbeing, especially children and teens."

6 In your own words

a. Do some research about the effects of social media on mental health. Answer these questions.

- What positive and negative effects does social media have on mental health?
- What are the biggest concerns around children and teens using social media?
- Why do people continue to use social media if it makes them unhappy?
- How can social-media use become an addiction? How is it similar to or different from other addictions?
- What are social-media companies doing to improve the situation?
- What have some governments done to help protect the people?
- In your opinion, what is the right thing for social-media companies to do?

b. Report your findings to the class and share the facts you learnt, as well as your opinions. Include facts and statistics that support your research. Give reasons to support your answers.