

# Promising public health interventions to address the effects of social media use on mental health - spotlight on the role of social media companies<sup>1</sup>

## Background and context

The impact of social media use on mental health is complex. Social media has been shown to have both positive and negative effects, however, there is growing concern and urgent need for action to counter the most substantial negative effects of social media.

To contribute to emerging evidence on this issue, Beyond Blue commissioned BehaviourWorks at Monash University to undertake a rapid evidence review to identify public health approaches that could help address social media's negative effects while fostering its positive effects, such as providing information, education and a platform for social and emotional support. The rapid review included relevant academic literature and select grey literature published since 2020.

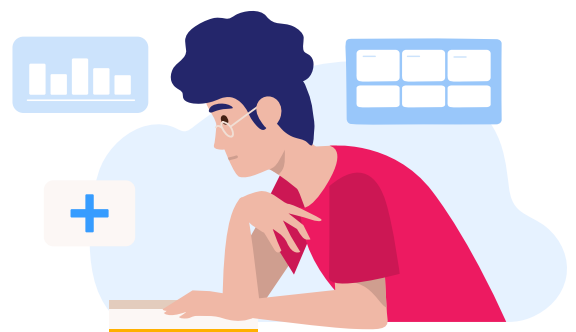
Key findings included the important role of social media literacy interventions, and the need for social media companies to take seriously the principles of **safety by design**.<sup>2</sup> There are clear opportunities for policymakers, researchers and advocacy organisations to advance this agenda.

Beyond Blue has produced two briefing notes from this rapid review, focused on:

- the role of social media companies in mitigating mental health harms from their platforms
- opportunities to improve mental health and wellbeing outcomes through social media literacy interventions.

## Findings spotlight – the role of social media companies

Beyond Blue acknowledges the challenge of regulating social media platforms, and the extensive work led by the Australian eSafety Commissioner on progressing the agenda on safety by design. Recent international examples include the European Union's Digital Services Act, which provides a clear regulatory framework for digital services, including



specific requirements for ‘very large online platforms’ such as Meta, Snapchat, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter).

Social media companies have a key role in identifying and addressing critical risks inherent in their platforms, including those posed to young people. Some researchers argue the social media industry should be recognised as a commercial determinant of health due to features that elicit addictive behaviours and can be associated with distress and other negative mental health symptoms.<sup>3</sup>

The rapid review highlighted the importance of social media companies prioritising safety by design and tackling the negative impacts of their platforms, including:

- **avoiding business practices and platform design approaches that prioritise engagement over risks to safety and rights of users<sup>4</sup>** – this includes considering features such as push notifications, autoplay, infinite scroll, and the design and implementation of algorithms;<sup>5</sup>
- **making online platforms more accountable for reducing online harm**, including measures and tools that adequately allow users to manage their own safety, and that are set to the most secure privacy and safety levels by default;<sup>6</sup>
- ensuring that their content moderation policies and implementation approaches are up to the task of protecting people’s rights and safety, as well as being equity focused and trauma-informed;<sup>7</sup>
- **ensure default settings for children are set to highest safety and privacy standards;<sup>8</sup>**
- developing greater transparency and responsiveness in reporting systems and research findings based on their proprietary data;<sup>9</sup>
- focusing on **mitigating the risks of cyberbullying and discrimination**, which can exacerbate depressive symptoms and psychological distress;<sup>10</sup>
- adhere to and enforce age minimums for their services.<sup>11</sup>

### **Policymakers can focus efforts on the following:**

- develop age-appropriate health and safety standards for social media companies, and create means to require higher data privacy standards relating to children;
- support the continued development of evidence-based digital literacy initiatives<sup>12,13</sup>, including those that demonstrate to the participant how platforms are designed to grab and maintain their attention;<sup>14</sup>
- improvements to privacy, inclusivity, informed consent and data security on social media platforms;<sup>15</sup>
- strengthen requirements for increased transparency and responsiveness from social media companies in reporting systems, including making available their proprietary data for research.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The research question: What are promising public health interventions to address the effects of social media use on the mental health and wellbeing of the community?

<sup>2</sup> Safety by Design is described by the Australian E-Safety Commissioner as 'the ways technology companies can minimise online threats by anticipating, detecting and eliminating online harms before they occur. It encourages technology companies to alter their design ethos from 'moving fast and breaking things' or 'profit at all costs' to 'moving thoughtfully', investing in risk mitigation at the front end and embedding user protections from the get-go.' For an explanation of Safety by Design principles, see <https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/safety-by-design#safety-by-design-principles>

<sup>3</sup> Zenone, M., Kenworthy, N., & Maani, N. (2022). The Social Media Industry as a Commercial Determinant of Health. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2022.6840>

<sup>4</sup> Dunn, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Brittain, H. (2023). Supporting safer digital spaces: Special report. CIGI. Available from <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/supporting-safer-digital-spaces/> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>5</sup> Algorithms designed to tailor content to personal interests aim to increase user engagement, which generates profit. However, this can lead users towards more polarised content that amplifies their interests and concerns. Rodgers, R. F., Paxton, S. J., & Wertheim, E. H. (2021). Take idealized bodies out of the picture: A scoping review of social media content aiming to protect and promote positive body image. *Body Image*, 38, 10–36.

<sup>6</sup> Australian eSafety Commissioner. (2024). Tipping the balance: LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences negotiating connection, self-expression and harm online. Available from <https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/the-digital-lives-of-young-lgbtq-people> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>7</sup> Dunn, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Brittain, H. (2023). Supporting safer digital spaces: Special report. CIGI. Available from <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/supporting-safer-digital-spaces/> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. (2023). Social media and youth mental health. Available from <https://apo.org.au/node/322809> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>9</sup> Australian eSafety Commissioner. (2024). Tipping the balance: LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences negotiating connection, self-expression and harm online. Available from <https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/the-digital-lives-of-young-lgbtq-people> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>10</sup> Liu, Y., Wu, Y. C., Fu, H., Guo, W. Y., & Wang, X. (2023). Digital intervention in improving the outcomes of mental health among LGBTIQ+ youth: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. (2023). Social media and youth mental health. Available from <https://apo.org.au/node/322809> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>12</sup> the Y. (2024). Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society. Available from [https://ymca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/FINAL\\_The-Y\\_Submission-to-the-Joint-Select-Committee-on-Social-Media-and-Australian-Society.pdf](https://ymca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/FINAL_The-Y_Submission-to-the-Joint-Select-Committee-on-Social-Media-and-Australian-Society.pdf) last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>13</sup> The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory. (2023). Social media and youth mental health. Available from <https://apo.org.au/node/322809> last accessed 26 August 2024

<sup>14</sup> Burnell, K., Fox, K. A., Maheux, A. J., & Prinstein, M. J. (2024). Social Media Use and Mental Health: A Review of the Experimental Literature and Implications for Clinicians. *Current Treatment Options in Psychiatry*, 11(1), 1–16.

<sup>15</sup> Okoro, Y. O., Ayo-Farai, O., Maduka, C. P., Okongwu, C. C., & Sodamade, O. T. (2024). The Role of technology in enhancing mental health advocacy: A systematic review. *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, 6(1), 37–50.

<sup>16</sup> Australian eSafety Commissioner. (2024). Tipping the balance: LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences negotiating connection, self-expression and harm online. Available from <https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/the-digital-lives-of-young-lgbtq-people> last accessed 26 August 2024