Media Release

THURSDAY 18 JULY 2024

Mental health organisations collaborate to call for changes to social media platforms

Mental health organisations ReachOut, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute are calling for a range of evidence-based measures to help improve the safety of social media platforms for young people, including verification of mental health information and limiting infinite scroll features.

In a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society, the three organisations set out a range of recommendations including: co-designed policy measures, policies that compel social media platforms to work according to safety-by-design principles, transparency and user-control when it comes to algorithms, verification of health content on platforms and funding for more research into the links between social media and mental health.

Director of Service at ReachOut, Jackie Hallan, said that although social media poses significant risks to young people, it is important to consider the benefits and unintended consequences of any ban.

"Young people are digital natives and for many that means that social media is already part of their worlds. Unfortunately, for too many young people that time on platforms has led to harm. It is clear that social media platforms need a lot of change to improve young people's mental health and wellbeing.

"However, the proposal that the age of accessing social media be increased from 13 to 16 simplifies what is a very complex issue. And, it ignores the fact that many young people are using social media to access things like mental health support, to build their identities and as a source of connection.

"The solutions we are proposing put the lived and living experiences of young people across Australia at the centre of policy making, they are evidence-based and they look at the complexity of young people's online worlds. What we don't want to see are solutions that lead to unintended harms," she said.

Professor Samuel Harvey, Executive Director of Black Dog Institute said it was important to look at the research on how young people were using different platforms and the impacts on their mental health and wellbeing - both positive and negative.

"The way young people use social media can be associated with mental health. Recent research from Black Dog Institute has found that using social media actively—mostly to communicate with in-person friends and peers - was associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety," he said.

"This tells us that online interactions with in-person peers and friends can enhance mental well-being by improving these connections. However, using social media mostly to scroll or passively view other people's content was linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety.

"What we don't know is the direction of the effect. For example, we don't know if young people who use social media to connect with friends are less anxious and depressed *because* they have more friends, or whether young people passively scroll through content do so because they were already feeling down or anxious," Professor Harvey said.

Beyond Blue CEO Georgie Harman said social media brings both harm and benefits for our mental health and social media platforms themselves have a role to play in keeping online environments safe and healthy.

"We need to continue to equip people – young people, their parents and carers and social media users in general – with the skills and knowledge they need to feel safe in their online environments. But the onus can't be on users alone," Ms Harman said.

"The social media companies need to step up and play their part because people are telling us quite clearly they don't like getting caught up doomscrolling and they want a say in what content is served up to them. So our question is 'what are social media platforms going to do to address this?'" she said.

The full submission can be accessed [here](.).

ENDS