

# Inquiry into social media impacts on Australian society

July 2024

Collaborative submission from ReachOut, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute



**Acknowledgement of Country**

We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present. We recognise connection to Country as integral to health and wellbeing.

**Acknowledgement of Lived Experience**

We also acknowledge people with living and lived experience of mental ill-health and recovery, along with their carers, families and supporters. We value the courage of those who share their unique perspectives for the purpose of learning and growing together to achieve better outcomes for all. We recognise their vital contribution to the sector and to the development of effective mental health and wellbeing services.

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# Executive summary

This submission, jointly developed by ReachOut, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute, addresses the impacts of social media on Australian society, with a focus on its impacts on mental health and wellbeing. It presents an account of existing and emerging evidence of the impacts of social media use on mental health, community experience of social media and mental health, and the way mental health organisations use social media to support the community. The submission canvases both harms and benefits, and offers recommendations for reform, with a particular emphasis on young people.

Social media has become established worldwide as an important tool for connection, communication and creation, changing human behaviour at scale and occupying a place in most people's daily lives. An estimated 78.3 per cent of the Australian population uses social media.<sup>1</sup> Australian adolescents are highly engaged: 93 per cent use it daily, spending an average of two to three hours on platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram.<sup>2</sup> While social media offers benefits for mental health and wellbeing (via peer support, access to information, and a sense of community), it also poses risks (such as the spread of misinformation, harmful content and addictive behaviours).

Algorithms on these platforms appear to prioritise emotionally charged content to drive increased user engagement. This sort of content can exacerbate mental health issues by promoting unrealistic standards, exposing users to distressing material, amplifying negativity,<sup>3</sup> and displacing time that could be spent on health-promoting activities such as getting sufficient sleep, exercising, and socialising in real life.

How young people use social media may play an important role in its association with mental health symptoms. Recent research has found that using social media to passively consume content is associated with higher symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and disordered eating in adolescents. By contrast, using social media to communicate with people adolescents know in real life is associated with lower symptoms of depression and anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

Young people and their parents or carer givers have divergent perceptions of social media's impacts. Recent research with Australian parents and carer givers found that nearly 60 per cent of respondents were concerned about their teenagers' use of social media. However, young people themselves ranked social media outside their top ten issues of concern, behind cost-of-living pressures, climate change and other issues. The majority of parents felt only moderately or 'not at all' equipped to manage their concerns around their teenagers' social media use.<sup>5</sup>

Globally, social media is being examined as a potential commercial determinant of health, alongside ultra-processed food, tobacco, alcohol and fossil fuels.<sup>6,7</sup> These commercial determinants are attracting

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<sup>1</sup> S. Kemp (2024). Digital 2024: Australia. *Datareportal*. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-australia>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Q. Liu, F. Su, A. Mu & X. Wu (2024). Understanding social media information sharing in individuals with depression: Insights from the elaboration likelihood model and schema activation theory. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, Apr, 12(17), 1587–609. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S450934> PMID: 38628982; PMCID: PMC11020237.

<sup>4</sup> K. Maston, L. Brown & A. Werner-Seidler (2024). *Adolescent mental health and screen use: Summary of findings from the Future Proofing Study*. Sydney: Black Dog Institute. (Publication in preparation)

<sup>5</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Parenting in the digital age: Navigating concerns about the online world of young people*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia. <https://d1robvnmkdqpun.cloudfront.net/6443e8c2623028a2222d030f8d7ea6f2.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Marco Zenone et.al (2023). The Social Media Industry as a Commercial Determinant of Health. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management* 2023;12,6840

<sup>7</sup> A. B. Gilmore, A. Fabbri, F. Baum et al. (2023). Defining and conceptualising the commercial determinants of health. *Lancet*. Apr, 401(10383), 1194–213. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(23\)00013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)00013-2). PMID: 36966782.

increasingly more focus as powerful transnational corporations operate in ways that cause health and social harms, across borders, while externalising the cost of doing so.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, significant numbers of Australians turn to social media as a source of mental health information and support. A 2024 ReachOut survey found that young people used social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram as much as they use Google to search for mental health information.<sup>9</sup> Both young people and adults who participated in surveys indicated they want changes to platform design, to give them more control over their experience and better access to safety features.

We argue in favour of mandating safety-by-design approaches to social media product development so that user wellbeing is prioritised over user engagement (as measured by time on-site). As well, there is a need to equip young people and their parents, care givers and other support networks with the skills and knowledge they need to create safe social media environments even as algorithms and product design impose limits on individual agency.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Parenting in the digital age: Navigating concerns about the online world of young people*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia. <https://d1robvhmkdpun.cloudfront.net/6443e8c2623028a2222d030f8d7ea6f2.pdf>

# Summary of recommendations

1. **Policy co-design:** We must co-design with young people any policy that aims to protect young people on social media, while also consulting broadly with parents and other care givers, educators, mental health experts and youth organisations. It is critical that we acknowledge that effective policy is the result of genuine co-design and the importance of young people's experiences, agency and voice in the development of policies that impact them.
2. **Safety-by-design:** Mandate safety-by-design principles for social media platforms and use them to limit features such as infinite scroll, while requiring default safety settings for users under age 16. Conduct regular independent audits to ensure compliance, with penalties for non-compliance.
3. **Algorithmic transparency:** Require that social media companies provide regular transparency reports on content being served by their algorithms to Australian users, similar to the [transparency reports available in the United States](#). Provide real-time Application Programming Interface (API) access to Australian public health researchers to assist them to monitor and analyse the impact of algorithms on mental health and wellbeing.
4. **User control:** Require social media companies to provide easily accessible features for users to customise their own feeds. Support these changes with an industry-funded campaign, tailored to the Australian market, to increase awareness of content customisation features and how to use them.
5. **Verification of health content:** Require social media companies to collaborate with Australian health and mental health organisations to establish a model for verification of trusted evidence-based content, including content about self-harm, suicide and eating disorders, and to ensure that verified and evidence-informed health content is boosted and labelled.
6. **Research, digital literacy and harm-minimisation funding:** Establish a national fund to promote digital literacy, to foster collaboration, and to support research into the impact of social media on mental health, including promotion and expansion of new and existing harm-minimisation initiatives for at-risk groups.

# Introduction

The [Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society](#), specifies in its Terms of Reference that it is 'inquiring into the influence and impacts of social media on Australian society, with particular reference to:

- (a) the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media;
- (b) the decision of Meta to abandon deals under the News Media Bargaining Code;
- (c) the important role of Australian journalism, news and public interest media in countering mis and disinformation on digital platforms;
- (d) the algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health;
- (e) other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material; and
- (f) any related matters.'

ReachOut, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute are three national mental health sector organisations in Australia that have a focus on providing digital mental health and wellbeing support. ReachOut is a known and trusted source of digital mental health advice, support and connection for young people aged 12 to 25. Beyond Blue, the national depression and anxiety initiative, is an established policy advocate and a trusted source of earlier intervention mental health advice, services and connection for all people in Australia. Black Dog Institute has deep experience in clinical research into digital interventions and screen use. Together, our organisations are uniquely positioned to synthesise insights gleaned from robust academic research and evaluation, and real-world digital service delivery and content experience, to support the Joint Select Committee's inquiry.

This submission will pay particular attention to point (d) in the Terms of Reference, acknowledging that the other points also have individual, community and societal-level mental health impacts from further upstream. (For example, disinformation and harmful content can undermine social cohesion, and algorithms can create echo chambers that seed and reinforce attitudes that can deepen divisions in society.<sup>10</sup>) The submission will also address, as 'related matters' (point f), opportunities to use the influence of social media to support Australia's mental health and wellbeing.

The submission will not address the technical feasibility of using age verification to protect Australian children from social media (point a). While we do not discount the significant and justified concerns especially of parents and other caregivers, our submission offers alternatives that we believe will be more effective and impactful than bans. Bans risk exposing to harm those who circumvent them, limit young people's opportunities to learn about how to use online spaces safely, and diminish social media companies' responsibility to provide safe products, especially for young users.

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<sup>10</sup> Centre for Digital Wellbeing, Kingston ACT. <https://digitalwellbeing.org.au/the-issue/>

# Evidence

## What are the effects of social media use on the mental health of young people in Australia?

The existing evidence on the impact of social media on mental health is largely focused on young users and is mixed. There is considerable anecdotal evidence of instances of profound harm, mixed academic evidence of impacts and benefits, and strong evidence from users about their experience of both positive and negative impacts of social media use.

The Black Dog Institute's Future Proofing Study, launched in 2019 as Australia's largest longitudinal study into youth mental health, surveyed 4,058 adolescents when they were in Year 8 and again in when they were in Year 9 to learn more about the relationships between screen use and mental health over time. Adolescents' responses were analysed to investigate the cross-sectional and longitudinal associations between overall daily screen time and symptoms of depression and anxiety over a 12-month period.<sup>11</sup> While cross-sectional analyses of Year 8 students showed significant associations between daily screen time and greater symptoms of depression and anxiety, these associations were not maintained over the 12-month period from Year 8 to Year 9. Screen time in Year 8 was not associated with greater anxiety by the time students were in Year 9, and only weakly associated with greater depression.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to public opinion, these findings indicate that higher daily screen time is unlikely to be the cause of depression and anxiety in adolescents. More likely, the association between screen use and mental health is bidirectional, meaning that mental health symptoms and screen use influence each other.<sup>13</sup> For example, if a young person is feeling down or stressed, they might spend more time on screens to distract themselves. But the more time they spend on screens, the more likely they are to encounter things that could make them feel even worse. And so, it could become a cycle where their mood affects their screen time, and their screen time affects their mood.

While there has been widespread focus on established and potential negative impacts of social media, there is also significant evidence of a range of positive benefits of social media use. Numerous studies have demonstrated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, use of social media played a significant role in helping young people to manage anxiety<sup>14</sup> and depression.<sup>15</sup> Other studies with specific sub-groups of young

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<sup>11</sup> Werner-Seidler, Aliza, and Maston, Kate, et al. "The Future Proofing Study: Design, methods and baseline characteristics of a prospective cohort study of the mental health of Australian adolescents." *Int J Methods Psychiatr Res*, vol.32,no.3, 2023, pp. e1954-. doi:10.1002/mpr.1954

<sup>12</sup> Li, Sophie H. and Batterham, Philip J. and Whitton, Alexis and Maston, Kate and Khan, Asaduzzaman and Christensen, Helen and Werner-Seidler, Aliza, Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Associations of Screen Time with Depression and Anxiety and the Influence of Maladaptive Social Media Use and Gender. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4872339>

<sup>13</sup> Flannery JS, Maza MT, Kilic Z, Telzer EH. Cascading bidirectional influences of digital media use and mental health in adolescence. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*. 64: Elsevier; 2023. p. 255-87.

<sup>14</sup> V. Cauberghe, I. Van Wesenbeek, S. De Jans et al. (2021). How adolescents use social media to cope with feelings of loneliness and anxiety during COVID-19 lockdown. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0478>

<sup>15</sup> L. Orsolini, U. Volpe, U. Albert et al. (2022). Use of social network as a coping strategy for depression among young people during the COVID-19 lockdown: Findings from the COMET collaborative study. *Annals of General Psychiatry*, 21, 44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12991-022-00419-w>



people, such as international students,<sup>16</sup> have found that social media can have positive effects on wellbeing. International research shows that online social support from peers can act as a buffer against stress, especially for young people from marginalised groups such as ethnic, sexual and racial minorities.<sup>17</sup> For young people who struggle with social relationships in the offline world, social media can provide an alternative for social connection and a safe haven from the difficulties of everyday life.<sup>18</sup>

Prevention United's policy brief *The Impact of Screen Time and Social Media on the Mental Health of Young Australians* highlighted a range of benefits of social media use by young people, including improved social connectedness, reduced loneliness, increased self-determination, education and independence, enhanced feelings of control in their lives, and increased emotional support. Benefits were found to be 'particularly evident among young people who are at risk of social isolation and/or social exclusion because of diversity or geography'.<sup>19</sup>

## How are young people in Australia using social media?

Australian adolescents are the most connected generation, with 97 per cent owning a personal screen-based device and 50 per cent having access to five or more devices.<sup>20</sup> Digital technology is integral to their daily lives, encompassing education, social interaction, entertainment and more. Adolescents inhabit a 'hybrid reality', seamlessly blending online and offline experiences, which significantly influences their thinking and information processing.<sup>21</sup>

In 2024, according to Black Dog Institute's Future Proofing Study, 93 per cent of young Australians reported using social media at least once a day. On average, young Australians spend 2–3 hours per day on social media, with the most popular social media platforms being Instagram (79%), Snapchat (74%) and TikTok (67%).<sup>22</sup> Of these platforms, Australian young people reported spending the most time each day on TikTok: an average of 2–3 hours, compared to 1–2 hours each day on Snapchat and 0–1 hours on Instagram (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> H. Pang & J. Wang (2020). Promoting or prohibiting: Understanding the influence of social media on international students' acculturation process, coping strategies, and psychological consequences. *Telematics and Informatics*, 54, 101454. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2020.101454>

<sup>17</sup> US Surgeon General's Advisory (2023). *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*, 6.

<sup>18</sup> S. Jung, C. Sindermann, M. Li et al. (2019). Anxiety-related coping styles, social support and internet use disorder. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00640>

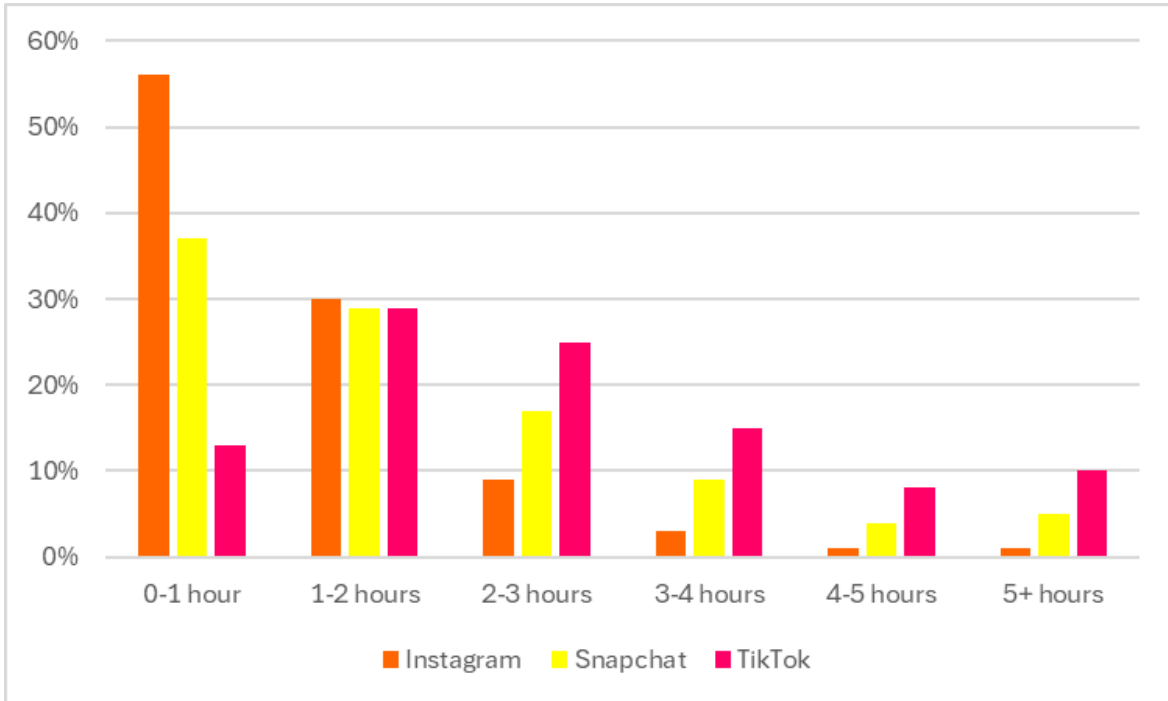
<sup>19</sup> K. Maidment, Z. Tonna, M. Houlihan & S. Carbone (2024). *The Impact of Screen Time and Social Media on the Mental Health of Young Australians*. Melbourne: Prevention United.

<sup>20</sup> Australian Communications Authority (2024). *Communications and Media in Australia: The Digital Lives of Younger Australians*. Australian Communications Authority.

<sup>21</sup> M. Benvenuti, M. Wright, J. Naslund & A. C. Miers (2024). How technology use is changing adolescents' behaviors and their social, physical, and cognitive development. *Current Psychology*, 42(19), 16466–9. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-023-04254-4>

<sup>22</sup> K. Maston, L. Brown & A. Werner-Seidler (2024). Adolescent mental health and screen use: Summary of findings from the Future Proofing Study. Sydney: Black Dog Institute. (Publication in preparation)

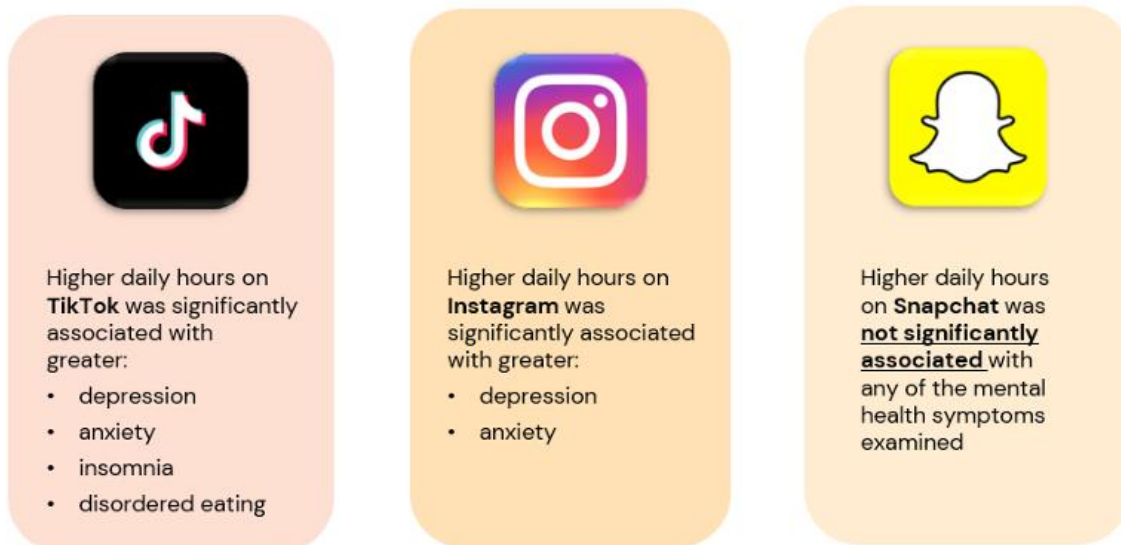
<sup>23</sup> Black Dog Institute (2024). *Future Proofing Study: Adolescent Mental Health and Digital Technology Use*. Sydney: Black Dog Institute. [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/research-projects/the-future-proofing-study](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/research-projects/the-future-proofing-study); [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/research-centres/future-proofing/](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/research-centres/future-proofing/)



**Figure 1:** Amount of time Australian young people spend per day on top three social media apps. Source: Black Dog Institute, Future Proofing Study (2024).

### Do the top social media apps differ in their associations with youth mental health?

The Future Proofing Study also analysed the relationship between the amount of time spent per day on the top three social media apps and a range of mental health symptom measures in young people. It found that a higher number of hours spent each day on TikTok was significantly associated with greater depression, anxiety, insomnia and disordered eating. A higher number of hours on Instagram was associated with greater depression and anxiety. However, a higher number of hours on Snapchat was not found to be significantly associated with any of the mental health symptoms examined (Figure 3).



**Figure 2:** Associations between daily hours spent using TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat and mental health symptoms in adolescents.

Source: Black Dog Institute, Future Proofing Study (2024).

The differences between these apps are attributed to differences in the way that adolescents use them. The study showed that more frequently using social media to passively consume content was associated with higher symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and disordered eating. The design of TikTok and Instagram encourages its users to passively consume content; using algorithms to deliver its users targeted content and various features such as ‘infinite scroll’ that keep its users engaged for long periods of time. By contrast, the study found no evidence to indicate that using social media to facilitate social connections was associated with poorer mental health. Rather, it found that more frequently using social media to communicate with people teens knew in real life was associated with lower symptoms of depression and anxiety. This may explain why higher number of hours using Snapchat was not associated with any of the mental health symptoms examined, because Snapchat is a messaging app that adolescents primarily use to communicate with their friends.

## What other factors influence how social media affects youth mental health?

The impact of social media on adolescent mental health is highly individualised, as teenagers are all unique and use social media in different ways. Despite this variability, research has identified several common themes which can provide valuable insights into the broader trends and effects of social media use among adolescents. These include:

1. **Upward social comparisons** (comparing oneself to others who are seen as superior, or more successful in some way) is common among adolescents, particularly girls, where the focus of the comparison is body image, material objects, or lifestyle.<sup>242526</sup> For example, an experimental study found that adolescent girls who viewed digitally altered photos of girls' faces and bodies on Instagram reported having poorer body image compared to those who saw the original, unaltered photos.<sup>27</sup>
2. **Exposure to age-inappropriate or distressing content**, which is easily accessible to adolescents online. Algorithms on social media apps have been shown to increase exposure to psychologically harmful content to susceptible individuals which is often related to disordered eating, self-harm, and prejudice or discrimination.<sup>282930</sup>
3. **Time displacement.** The amount of time spent on screens becomes a problem when it significantly displaces other healthy and important activities, including learning, social interaction, sleeping and physical activity.<sup>31</sup> For example, the Future Proofing Study found that 83 per cent of Australian

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<sup>24</sup> Nesi J, Mann S, Robb M. Teens and mental health: How girls really feel about social media. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense. 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Irmer A, Schmiedek F. Associations between youth's daily social media use and well-being are mediated by upward comparisons. *Communications Psychology*. 2023;1(1):12.

<sup>26</sup> Cataldo I, Lepri B, Neoh MJY, Esposito G. Social media usage and development of psychiatric disorders in childhood and adolescence: a review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. 2021;11:508595.

<sup>27</sup> Kleemans M, Daalmans S, Carbaat I, Anschütz D. Picture perfect: The direct effect of manipulated Instagram photos on body image in adolescent girls. *Media Psychology*. 2018;21(1):93-110.

<sup>28</sup> Bozzola E, Spina G, Agostiniani R, Barni S, Russo R, Scarpatò E, et al. The use of social media in children and adolescents: Scoping review on the potential risks. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2022;19(16):9960.

<sup>29</sup> Sala A, Porcaro L, Gómez E. Social Media Use and adolescents' mental health and well-being: An umbrella review. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*. 2024;14:100404

<sup>30</sup> Nesi J, Mann S, Robb M. Teens and mental health: How girls really feel about social media. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense. 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Castellacci F, Tveito V. Internet use and well-being: A survey and a theoretical framework. *Research policy*. 2018;47(1):308-25.

adolescents use screens in the 60 minutes before sleep, with 45 per cent going to sleep later than intended due to screen use. It is well established that sleep disturbance is associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>3233</sup>

## How do social media algorithms impact the mental health of young people in Australia?

Adolescents are developmentally primed to seek social connections, making them particularly susceptible to the influences of digital technology. Technology companies leverage these developmental drives with algorithms designed to capture and hold adolescent attention, creating challenges for their developing self-identity and emotion regulation.<sup>34</sup> A Harvard School of Public Health study found that advertisements on social media aimed at children and adolescents generated almost US\$11 billion in sales in one year.<sup>35</sup>

Algorithms on social media platforms prioritise content that is likely to enhance user engagement. This content often includes emotionally charged or sensational material, which can negatively impact mental health by promoting unrealistic standards and exposing users to distressing images.<sup>36</sup> Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to these algorithms, due to their developmental stage. This period of heightened sensitivity to social feedback and peer validation can lead to difficulties in disengaging from social media platforms, potentially exacerbating mental health issues. The curated content can create a distorted perception of reality, where adolescents feel constant pressure to measure up to idealised standards. But equally, if a user spends time engaging with potentially harmful content, those same metrics may lead to more of the same material or increasingly harmful material appearing in their feeds.

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<sup>32</sup> Rojo-Wissar DM, Acosta J, DiMarzio K, Hare M, Dale CF, Sanders W, et al. The role of sleep in prospective associations between parent reported youth screen media activity and behavioral health. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. 2024;29(1):33-42.

<sup>33</sup> Perrault AA, Bayer L, Peuvrier M, Afyouni A, Ghisletta P, Brockmann C, et al. Reducing the use of screen electronic devices in the evening is associated with improved sleep and daytime vigilance in adolescents. *Sleep*. 2019;42(9).

<sup>34</sup> J. Siongers & B. Spruyt (2024). Navigating the social media seas: Understanding the complex relationship between social media use and adolescent well-being. *Child Indicators Research*, 17(1), 177–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-023-10080-8>

<sup>35</sup> A. Raffoul, Z. J. Ward, M. K. Santoso, J. R. Kavanaugh & S. B. Austin (2023). Social media platforms generate billions of dollars in revenue from US youth: Findings from a simulated revenue model. *PLoS ONE*, 18(12), e0295337. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0295337>

<sup>36</sup> C. G. Ionescu & M. Licu (2023). Are TikTok algorithms influencing users' self-perceived identities and personal values? A mini review. *Social Sciences*, 12(8), 465. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12080465>

# Community Experience

## Youth perspectives

### Young people use social media to access mental health support

Social media is also an important delivery channel for mental health–related information for young people, who increasingly rely upon it as they explore issues, seek information and engage in help-seeking. For instance, new research by ReachOut exploring young people’s use of social media as a mental health resource found that they use social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram as much as Google to search for mental health information.<sup>37</sup> Further, research by the eSafety Commissioner found that LGBTIQ+ teens are twice as likely as the national average to seek mental health information online.<sup>38</sup>

Young people surveyed by ReachOut report that social media platforms play an important role as an information source for those who don’t have access to, or don’t want, professional mental health support. More than 50 per cent of participants in a ReachOut survey reported that they used social media as a resource in those situations.<sup>39</sup> This is particularly the case for young people with a probable serious mental illness, 35 per cent of whom said they searched for mental health information on social media once a week or more, compared to 14 per cent of those who don’t have a probable serious mental illness.<sup>40</sup>

Removing a help-seeking pathway utilised by those who are unwilling, or unable, to access support via other channels could therefore have significant negative impacts on these young people’s mental health and wellbeing, and potentially reduce overall help-seeking behaviours across the community.

Young people conceptualise mental health support on social media as encompassing a broad range of content, from uplifting, light-hearted videos for immediate relief from negative feelings to more serious content with advice on specific mental health conditions. Young people in the ReachOut research identified four broad categories of content :

- calming and uplifting content
- content promoting self-care
- content addressing broad life challenges and concerns
- content specifically about mental health and mental health conditions.

While the negative impact of social media use on youth mental health has received a great deal of attention, young people in ReachOut’s study described a number of benefits they believe are obtained from viewing mental health information on social media. These findings included:

- 56 per cent said mental health content on social media increased their mental health awareness
- 47 per cent have used these platforms as a way to find out how to get professional support
- 40 per cent have sought professional help after viewing mental health content online.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Mind Over Media: Supporting Youth Mental Health in the Digital Age*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

<sup>38</sup> eSafety Commissioner (2024). *Tipping the Balance: LGBTIQ+ Teens’ Experiences Negotiating Connection, Self-Expression and Harm Online*. Australian Government.

<sup>39</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Mind Over Media: Supporting Youth Mental Health in the Digital Age*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

*'[U]sing Reddit and Instagram allowed me to understand that what I was struggling with was OCD and not just general anxiety. Once I sought help, I got put on medication + found ways to manage my OCD and now I am 10x better. I figured this out through looking up my symptoms on Google and Reddit + following a writer on Instagram who described very similar experiences and had OCD.'*

– Female, 19, major city

Thematic analysis of qualitative data identified four key benefits: normalising mental illness, accessibility, social support and connection, and viewing uplifting content. Young people described how viewing information about mental health on social media platforms had increased their awareness of mental health and served to reduce stigma. It was also an easy and accessible way to find information and social support. As one participant in the study put it: *'If you are smart with social media it's easy to find other people who share the same experiences as you'* (Male, 17, major city). Being able to learn about the lived experience of others gave young people a sense of being less alone in their experiences and was reassuring, as well as helping them to realise that *'seeking help is okay'* (Male, 18, major city).<sup>42</sup> Young people also report that Social media has broader benefits than mental health information and support - including a sense of belonging and connectedness which are protective factors during formative years.

### **What young people want from social media**

Young people are aware of the risks of social media and of how its use can impact their mental health and wellbeing. In its *Mind Over Media* study, ReachOut asked young people open-ended questions about their experiences of using social media and community platforms for mental health information, as well as about what they would like to see from platforms and content creators to better support their mental health and wellbeing. As avid users of social and community platforms, many young people acknowledge that *'social media is a double-edged sword that can damage but also help [my] mental health'* (Male, 23, regional area). Thematic analysis of these responses revealed that young people are looking for tools for safety, better mental health content, and safe spaces and communities.<sup>43</sup>

Young people identified a range of improvements that would support their safety, including the ability to filter one's own content or to have some control over the 'algorithm' and platforms that would enable easier recognition of credible mental health information through better labelling, moderation and filtering of content. They also argued that many platforms don't monitor content sufficiently or respond adequately to complaints.<sup>44</sup>

In a further community survey of 93 young people conducted in June 2024 to help inform this submission, 84 per cent of the young people surveyed wanted more control over their social media algorithms, 79 per cent wanted better education about how to use social media in safe ways, and 86 per cent wanted more pathways to mental health and wellbeing support within platforms. Perhaps the most significant finding was that half of the participants in the study wanted limits on how far they could scroll in their feeds to be built into platforms, while a quarter were unsure and a quarter were opposed.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Internal lived experience poll emailed to ReachOut and Project Rokit's youth involvement groups. Answers were multiple choice (n=93).

## Parent perspectives

Parents and care givers in general feel burdened and ill-equipped to deal with the responsibility of educating and developing their children’s online safety skills,<sup>46</sup> with parents’ perceptions of online risk for children being very different based on their ethnicity, cultural adaptation, gender and age.<sup>47</sup>

A nationally representative survey of 631 parents and carers conducted by ReachOut in April 2023 found that 59 per cent of parents and carers said that their teens’ social media use was of concern to them, with 35 per cent saying it was a top issue of concern.<sup>48</sup> Nearly a third (28%) of parents and carers who were concerned about their teens’ use of social media reported that it had ‘a lot’ of impact on their teens’ wellbeing. In particular, parents indicated they are worried about the amount of time young people spend online and how that reduces time spent studying, exercising, sleeping, and engaging in face-to-face social interactions – activities that are important to wellbeing.<sup>49</sup> Studies in other countries demonstrate similar findings.<sup>50</sup>

Concerningly, 56 per cent of parents and carers who selected social media as a top issue of concern in ReachOut’s study said they felt only moderately equipped to deal with it, and 13 per cent felt not at all equipped to deal with it, indicating a need for increased awareness of or access to parenting support resources.<sup>51</sup> Data from ReachOut demonstrates this strong interest, with social media parenting support resources being viewed over 12,000 times by over 8,000 Australian users in the last 12 months, with time spent reading them around three times longer than for other resources for parents, indicating high levels of engagement. In contrast, in separate recent research by ReachOut (a nationally representative survey of 667 young people conducted in September 2022), young people ranked social media outside of their top ten issues of concern, at number 24, below issues such as the cost of living, loneliness and study stress.<sup>52</sup> Importantly, 57 per cent of young people reported spending time on digital platforms or social media as a way to cope with their various concerns and worries.<sup>53</sup>

Parents and carers have told ReachOut that they would like more access to quality, trusted information and knowledge about how to access help for the young person they care for.<sup>54</sup> This points to an opportunity to

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<sup>46</sup> J. Humphry, O. Boichak & J. Hutchinson (2023). *Emerging Online Safety Issues – Co-Creating Social Media with Young People – Research Report*. Sydney: The University of Sydney. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25910/7v6p-wj74>. p.5

<sup>47</sup> A. Imran, N. Khanom & A. Rahman (2023). Parental perception of children’s online behaviour: A study on ethnic communities in Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20, 5342. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20075342>

<sup>48</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Parenting in the Digital Age: Navigating Concerns about the Online World of Young People*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia. <https://d1robvhmkdqpun.cloudfront.net/6443e8c2623028a2222d030f8d7ea6f2.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> K. D. Douglas, K. K. Smith, M. W. Stewart et al. (2023). Parents’ intentions to monitor and mediate adolescent social media use and implications for school nurses. *Journal of School Nursing*, 39, 248–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840520983286>

<sup>51</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Parenting in the Digital Age: Navigating Concerns about the Online World of Young People*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia. <https://d1robvhmkdqpun.cloudfront.net/6443e8c2623028a2222d030f8d7ea6f2.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> ReachOut Australia (2023). *What Are You Worried About?: Young People’s Stress Burden and Its Impacts on Their Wellbeing*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia. <https://d1robvhmkdqpun.cloudfront.net/6ee09aefcd82ab783758e1da8dac6dce.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> ReachOut Australia (2024). *Parenting in the Digital Age: Navigating Concerns about the Online World of Young People*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia. <https://d1robvhmkdqpun.cloudfront.net/6443e8c2623028a2222d030f8d7ea6f2.pdf>

better promote existing resources such as those available through the e-safety commission and ReachOut. Parents/carers also reported that improved government regulation and support and education within schools would be helpful.<sup>55</sup>

## Lived experience perspectives

Across the general population, people with lived experience of anxiety and depression say that social media has mixed effects on their mental health. Seventy per cent of the 112 social media users who responded to a Beyond Blue poll of its *BlueVoices* lived experience community said social media affected their mental health and wellbeing in both positive and negative ways, compared to 15 per cent who said it was generally positive and 5 per cent who said it was generally negative. Thirty-two per cent said the main reason they used social media was to connect with family and friends, ahead of 25 per cent who said they used it for learning and entertainment, 19 per cent who use it to connect with people who have similar interests, and 15 per cent who use it to stay informed about the news.<sup>56</sup>

Social media's negative effects were identified as: taking people away from other activities (37%); making people feel bad about themselves (22%); and causing people to doubt the accuracy or reliability of content (21%). Respondents were asked about the design features they found most harmful to their mental health and wellbeing. They identified infinite scroll (29%), and algorithms that expose them to content they had not actively sought and didn't want to see (28%), ahead of push notifications and other features that distract (19%), and 'likes', 'views' or 'follower' metrics that influence self-worth (17%).<sup>57</sup> There appears to be a shared view between adults and young people that infinite scroll and algorithms are harmful features of social media.

Members of Beyond Blue's online community forum report experiencing fear of missing out and social comparison arising from their social media use. For example:

*'I was brought up in the generation of social media use (Gen Z). It is super hard for me to stay away from it ... I myself would love advice about how to stay away from it. Especially when everyone else uses it and it's the only way I can communicate with my friends and family.'*

– Beyond Blue forums post

*'I was constantly comparing myself to others. It was not good for my self-esteem or anxiety.'*

– Beyond Blue forums post

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Internal lived experience poll emailed to Beyond Blue's *BlueVoices* community and open for responses from June 14–23. Answers were multiple choice and free text (n=112).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



## **Mental health service provider perspectives**

### **Australians seek mental health information from social media**

Social media is emerging as a key source of information about mental health. *Australia's Mental Health and Wellbeing Check*, Beyond Blue's representative population-level survey, shows that 10 per cent of Australians seek mental health information from social media sources such as Facebook and Instagram. One in eight Australians engage with Beyond Blue content, via either the Beyond Blue website, handouts/brochures or social media. Half (50%) of those people who have engaged with Beyond Blue content or one of its services take action to support their mental health, such as by seeking more information online or speaking to friends or their GP. Respondents identified YouTube, Beyond Blue, Reddit and Facebook as their main sources of online mental health information.<sup>58</sup>

However, social media users also recognise impacts on their wellbeing. About 58 per cent of Australians nominate 'taking a break from social media' as a self-management strategy they use to improve or maintain their wellbeing. (Others included getting more sleep, increasing their physical exercise and taking time off work.) This strategy (taking a break) increases in popularity as the age of respondents increased<sup>59</sup>.

### **Social media enables timely conversations with young people**

For many mental health services, social media is no longer simply a way to market and share news about their services; instead, it is an active part of their service mix. ReachOut uses social media platforms to connect with young people and meet them where they are, rather than expect them to search for its services themselves. ReachOut's social media content aims to be timely, addressing key events happening in young people's world and responding to how these may affect their mental health and wellbeing. ReachOut's research and experience show that by using an 'everyday issues' framing and by sharing stories from other young people who have faced similar challenges, it can better engage young people with mental health support. Social media content is presented in a format that feels accessible to young people while still providing educational and factual information. The primary goal of ReachOut's social media content is to validate and educate, but also to take action to encourage further support.

ReachOut also delivers paid social campaigns to drive brand awareness, acquisition and reach; to inform young people about its services such as PeerChat and its Online Community; and to provide information about ReachOut. Through targeted advertising and sponsored posts, ReachOut offers support, education and resources about mental health issues. It accomplishes this through evidence-based national digital media campaigns that are co-designed with young people and target broad and at-risk youth populations (ages 12–25) across Australia. Social media provides significant reach to young people in Australia who may need support. In 2022–23, ReachOut's organic social media reach was over 3.4 million, while its in-kind and paid campaigns reached over 1.5 million users across the Snapchat, Meta and Google platforms.

### **Social media can help to support diverse communities**

Beyond Blue takes a similar approach. The organisation uses social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and, with increasingly less focus, X) to share information and educational resources about mental health in ways that align with events, current issues and specific mental health promotion campaign objectives.

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<sup>58</sup> Social Research Centre (2023). *Australia's Mental Health and Wellbeing Check* [Unpublished]. Prepared for Beyond Blue.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

Audience segmentation, surveys, data and insights, and co-design allow Beyond Blue to deliver content in ways that best meet the needs of specific help-seeking cohorts, in line with the organisation's focus on earlier intervention.

During the pandemic, Beyond Blue used co-design workshops to reach culturally and linguistically diverse communities by engaging Arabic young people, who are often the English-speaking link between their communities and the broader public. Young adults aged 18–24 from Syria, Egypt and Jordan decided that social media posts about listening skills would be beneficial for their communities and co-created content about this topic with Beyond Blue.

These sorts of approaches helped Beyond Blue to reach more than 8.3 million people via Facebook over the 12 months to June 2024. There were more than 546,000 interactions with this content, the overwhelming majority of which were positive (e.g. 'likes' or 'shares'). People engaging with Beyond Blue's content often use supportive language that binds the community and demonstrates encouragement and care. For example, one community member responded to a recent Facebook post about belonging in this way: '*[We] need to find our tribe. Keep looking[,] guys[,] or start your own tribe.*'

### **Initiatives for keeping social media safe**

In addition to promoting educational and non-clinical mental health-related content, Beyond Blue uses social media to guide people to further support, and often supports people within social media channels themselves. The majority of Beyond Blue's website traffic originates through search (i.e. Google) or social media (e.g. Facebook and Instagram), and about 12 per cent of this website traffic is associated with immediate support-seeking.

As well, a team of moderators works around the clock to support people posting on Beyond Blue's social media channels and online community forum. The role of the moderators is to remove harmful content, support positive engagement, and reach out to offer further support as needed, including in the case of critical escalations. Over the past 18 months, Beyond Blue moderators have reviewed 41,000 replies. Significant community events, such as the Bondi Junction attacks of April 2024, can increase demands for moderation.

In the hours after the Bondi Junction tragedy, Beyond Blue created a Facebook post reminding followers that mental health support was available. Moderators saw a 15-fold increase in the number of responses compared to average volumes. One-third of those were unpublishable. Moderators intervened to ensure that discriminatory, inflammatory and false information was removed as quickly as possible.

Community service-style announcements would support efforts by not-for-profits to deliver evidence-based mental health information to the community by removing cost barriers related to social media activity. Beyond Blue now pays standard rates to 'boost' posts on Meta in order to reach the same number of people that its unpaid (organic) posts were reaching two years ago, despite comparably relevant content. This is significant, as more than 638,000 people 'follow' Beyond Blue on Facebook.

## **Initiatives for partnering with social media platforms**

The approach taken to surfacing, moderating and promoting credible mental health information within platforms varies significantly by social media company, as does each social media company's approach to engaging with mental health organisations and the broader online safety community. ReachOut engages with social media companies in good faith to try to improve their understanding of safety issues and to improve access to mental health resources within platforms.

ReachOut is an active member of Meta's Youth Safety partner network. This partnership enables ReachOut to provide direct feedback to Meta on platform safety issues and supports its Youth Ambassadors to engage in Meta's Youth Safety consultations and programs. ReachOut also regularly partners with Meta on projects and campaigns to support youth mental health and online safety via Meta platforms and, in particular, to support and equip parents to engage effectively with their teens on online safety topics. These projects have included a 2022 content series called *ReelTalk*, which featured parent/teen pairs discussing online safety; the [Parent's Guide to Instagram](#), which seeks to explain, in simple terms, Instagram's safety features; and a forthcoming *Ask an Expert* style series. It also partnered with Meta on the *ReachOut Parents Live* content series, broadcast live on Facebook, which covered key parenting topics such as body image, communication, and drugs and alcohol.

ReachOut has partnered with Snap on a number of occasions on specific on-platform activations that sought to promote mental health and wellbeing. These include Snap's *Here For You* in-app portal (in late 2022), which provided support by surfacing resources to users searching topics related to friendship, stress and self-esteem. This portal was a significant success, with more than 132,000 users directly accessing ReachOut resources on these topics. A key – and welcome – feature of this portal was that it was structured to take users out of the Snapchat platform to engage with ReachOut's resources on its platform, providing easier pathways to further topics and support options.

These partnerships are effective and tangible demonstrations of how social media companies can engage with expert partners to promote safety outcomes for young people using their platforms. Unfortunately, not all platforms engage regularly or genuinely with Australian mental health and safety partners. For example, ReachOut was previously a member of Twitter's (now X) Trust and Safety Council. In December 2022, shortly after a change of ownership and a new, retrograde approach to platform safety, that council was disbanded. X has not subsequently re-engaged on online safety issues.

## **GEORGIA'S STORY**

*Georgia (she/they), 19, Melbourne*

I was 13 when I joined Instagram and SNAP. All of my friends were using the platforms and so it felt like a very normal thing to do. I saw it as a cool new way to communicate with my friends.

My mum helped me set up the accounts and it was fun. My mum was also my first follower on Instagram – we were both excited. Being on social media was a big step in my independence. It meant that I was able to chat to my friends with less oversight from my parents and make new connections.

When I was 15, body image started to become a concern for me. I think this happened because of the information I was getting from a range of different places, but what I was seeing on social media played a huge part in how I was feeling about my body.

At times, it felt like my feed was flooded with negative body image messages. Because I was so young, my critical thinking skills were not developed enough to consider the role social media was playing when it came to my mental health. Over time, things got worse for me and I developed an eating disorder.

COVID restrictions made things even harder. There was a lot of discussion on social media about bodies changing during this time and what everyone might look like when restrictions were lifted. I was also spending a lot more time on social media because there wasn't much else to do. This seemed to support some of the more negative patterns of behaviour I had developed.

When I was 17, I wanted to make a change in my life and began my recovery journey. An important part of this was realising that a lot of what I was seeing on social media was detrimental to my mental health. I actively set out to find more body positive content and this coincided with a positive trend of influencers who were talking about body positivity. It took a while for the algorithms to catch up with my new mindset, but social media actually ended up being a positive influence in my recovery journey.

I can see both the positive and negative impacts that social media has had on my life and my mental health. I think that as a young teen I would have benefited from more tools to help me navigate the spaces safely and to help me identify more easily trustworthy sources of information and support.

## **WILL'S STORY**

*Will (he/him), 21, Melbourne*

Friendships have always felt challenging for me. I went to a small primary school and I had one best friend. When I moved into high school, I also found myself struggling to connect with others and felt very anxious.

In Year 8 I joined a social media platform called Discord. This new online world revolutionised my social life. It allowed me to connect with people from all over the world. Over time, I got more interested and involved in Discord Communities. I eventually became a volunteer moderator and then a community leader. That was one of the best decisions of my life because of the connections I was able to make.

As a young person who struggled with anxiety and depression, connection with like-minded people on social media gave me a place and a space to discuss life and its challenges. I didn't have that before. Now, I have even translated some of those online friendships into real life, which means a lot to me.

There were downsides as well, though, when it came to my life on social media. I often found myself dealing with situations that I didn't feel comfortable with online. Many platforms offer little to no customer support – it is often impossible to talk to a real human to resolve any issues that come up, which is something I feel would have been really helpful for me.

Time off the platform helped me to see that I didn't have a healthy relationship with Discord. While previously the platform was an important way for me to connect with others, later I found that I prioritised time on the platform over my studies and in-person connections.

In 2024 I decided to leave Discord to pursue other interests and spend more time in the offline world. I have now come to a place where I really appreciate and love the relationships I have in my offline world. I've also been able to spend more time on my studies and have time to pursue other opportunities such as travelling overseas.

# Recommendations

## 1. Policy co-design

**Issue:** The effectiveness of policies aimed at protecting young people on social media is often limited by a lack of direct input from the very individuals they are intended to protect. Policy making in isolation from the target group can result in measures that are out of touch with the actual needs and experiences of young people and can inadvertently create perverse outcomes through underground behaviours.

**Solution:** Co-design with young people any policy intended to protect young people on social media. This should include broad consultations with parents, and other caregivers, educators, mental health experts and youth organisations. Ensuring that young people's experiences, agency and voices are central to policy development will lead to more relevant and effective interventions.

**Rationale:** Engaging young people in policy co-design acknowledges their unique insights and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility. Studies have shown that policies and programs that involve the target demographic in their development are more likely to be effective and well received. This participatory approach can lead to more nuanced and practical solutions that better address the realities of young people's lives. Co-designed solutions create a culture of open conversations between young people and adults and can avoid solutions that result in covert or underground behaviours.

**Impact:** By involving young people in the policy-making process, the resulting policies will be more aligned with their needs and more likely to be successful. This approach also empowers young people, giving them a stake in their own wellbeing and fostering a collaborative effort among all the stakeholders involved.

## 2. Safety-by-design

**Issue:** Many social media platforms are designed to maximise user engagement, often at the expense of user safety. Features such as infinite scroll can contribute to excessive use and exposure to harmful content, and users themselves identify these features as harmful.

**Solution:** Introduce mandatory safety-by-design principles for social media platforms to protect users. Use these principles to limit features such as infinite scroll, and ensure that safety settings are applied by default for users under age 16. Conduct regular independent audits to ensure compliance. The regulatory framework of the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth) could be strengthened by ensuring that industry codes and safety measures, including safety-by-design principles for social media, are legally enforceable and underpinned by a legal duty of care with penalties for non-compliance.

**Rationale:** Safety-by-design principles ensure that platforms are built with user safety as a priority. Research indicates that features designed to prolong engagement can negatively impact mental health, particularly in adolescents. By mandating safety features, the government can mitigate these risks. Social media users in Australia, including young people and those with lived experience, suggest this is an area for improvement.

**Impact:** Implementing safety-by-design will help to create a safer online environment for young people, reducing the risk of mental health issues related to excessive social media use and exposure to harmful content. Regular audits will ensure that these safety measures are upheld, providing ongoing protection.

### 3. Algorithmic transparency

**Issue:** Social media algorithms often operate opaquely, with little transparency regarding how content is prioritised and served to users. This lack of transparency can lead to negative mental health impacts due to exposure to harmful or misleading content.

**Solution:** Require social media companies to provide regular transparency reports on the content served by their algorithms to Australian users. Additionally, provide real-time API access to public health researchers to monitor and analyse the impact of algorithms on mental health and wellbeing.

**Rationale:** Transparency reports and real-time data access allow for independent monitoring and research into the effects of social media algorithms. This can identify harmful patterns and enable the development of interventions to mitigate their negative impacts. Studies show that greater transparency in algorithmic processes can improve user trust and accountability.<sup>60</sup> Social media users in Australia, including young people and those with lived experience, say they want improvements in this area.

**Impact:** Increased transparency and monitoring can lead to more informed and effective regulatory interventions, reducing the negative mental health impacts associated with algorithmic content delivery. It can also foster a culture of accountability and ethical responsibility among social media companies.<sup>61</sup>

### 4. User control

**Issue:** Many users' negative experiences are driven by a lack of control over their algorithms. Many are also unaware of or unable to utilise features that allow them to customise their social media feeds, leading to passive consumption of potentially harmful content.

**Solution:** Require social media companies to provide easily accessible features for users to control or reset their algorithms and to customise their feeds. Additionally, run an industry-funded campaign, tailored to the Australian market, to increase awareness of these customisation features.

**Rationale:** Empowering users with control over their content feeds can reduce exposure to harmful content and / or misinformation and improve their mental health outcomes. Awareness campaigns can ensure that users understand and utilise these features effectively. Research shows that when users have more control over their online environments, they experience better mental health and wellbeing.<sup>62</sup> Social media users in Australia, including young people, say they want improvements in this area.

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<sup>60</sup> F. Pasquale (2015). *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Harvard University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674368279>; and B. D. Mittelstadt, P. Allo, M. Taddeo, S. Wachter & L. Floridi (2016). The ethics of algorithms: Mapping the debate. *Big Data & Society*, 3(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716679679>

<sup>61</sup> N. Diakopoulos (2020). *Automating the News: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Media*. Harvard University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674980136>; and M. Brkan & A. Bonnet (2020). Legal and ethical reflections on AI-systems in the context of professional secrecy. *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 11(2), 337–48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/err.2020.13>

<sup>62</sup> M. L. Williams, P. Burnap & L. Sloan (2018). Crime sensing with Big Data: The affordances and limitations of using open-source communications to estimate crime patterns. *British Journal of Criminology*, 58(2), 320–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azx047>; and D. Boyd (2014). *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. Yale University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300166316.001.0001>

**Impact:** Enhancing user control over algorithms and content feeds can mitigate the negative effects of passive consumption and promote healthier online behaviours. This can lead to improved mental health and wellbeing among social media users, particularly young people.<sup>63</sup>

## 5. Verification of health content

**Issue:** Unverified health content on social media can mislead users and exacerbate mental health issues, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as self-harm, suicide and eating disorders. Such misinformation can contribute to harmful behaviours and deter individuals from seeking appropriate professional help.

**Solution:** Require social media companies to collaborate with Australian health and mental health organisations to establish a model for verification of trusted evidence-based content or accounts. Boost verified and evidence-informed health content to make it more prominent and label it to differentiate it from unverified information.

**Rationale:** Verified health content provides users with accurate and reliable information, which is crucial for making informed decisions about their health. Social media users in Australia, including young people and those with lived experience, suggest this is an area for improvement. By collaborating with established health and mental health organisations, social media platforms can help to ensure that information widely shared on their platforms is based on the latest research and best practices. This reduces the risk of misinformation and promotes a healthier online environment. Studies have shown that exposure to accurate health information can significantly improve health literacy and outcomes.<sup>64</sup>

**Impact:** Improved access to verified health information can enhance users' understanding and management of their health, particularly their mental health. It helps to prevent the spread of harmful misinformation and supports better mental health outcomes by ensuring that users have greater access to accurate, evidence-based content. This initiative can also increase trust in social media platforms as sources of reliable health information.<sup>65</sup>

## 6. Research, digital literacy and harm-minimisation funding

**Issue:** There is a critical need for ongoing research to understand the evolving impact of social media on mental health, and to develop and disseminate more mental health and wellbeing support resources within platforms. Current research is often underfunded and lacks the breadth necessary to fully address the complexities of this issue. There is also limited funding and support for mental health and wellbeing services to engage in harm-minimisation activities, including providing evidence-based wellbeing and digital literacy resources on social media platforms.

**Solution:** Establish a new social media industry-funded model dedicated to implementing evidence-based wellbeing and digital literacy interventions and research on the impact of social media on mental health.

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<sup>63</sup> P. K. Masur, L. Reinecke, M. Ziegele & O. Quiring (2017). The interplay of intrinsic need satisfaction and Facebook-specific motives in explaining addictive behavior on Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 67, 251–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.039>; and D. A. Gentile, H. Choo, A. Liau, et al. (2012). Pathological video game use among youths: A two-year longitudinal study. *Pediatrics*, 127(2), e319–e329. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-1353>

<sup>64</sup> A. Vaezi & S. H. Javanmard (2020). Infodemic and risk communication in the era of COVID-19. *Advanced Biomedical Research*, 9, 10. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.4103/abr.abr\\_47\\_20](https://doi.org/10.4103/abr.abr_47_20); and M. O'Reilly, N. Dogra, J. Hughes, et al. (2018). Potential of social media in promoting mental health in adolescents. *Health Promotion International*, 33(5), 1024–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dax047>

<sup>65</sup> S. Livingstone, D. Kardefelt-Winther & M. Stoilova (2021). The global child: Opportunities and risks. In: *The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents, and Media*. Routledge (105–13). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367483257>



This would include promotion and expansion of new and existing harm-minimisation work and could be co-funded by government. Activities supported by this fund should be selected and conducted independently of its funders and should encourage collaboration between academic institutions, mental health organisations and social media companies.

**Rationale:** Continued research is essential for developing evidence-based policies and interventions that address the complex relationship between social media use and mental health. By funding research specifically aimed at understanding these impacts, policy makers can ensure that interventions are grounded in solid evidence. Collaboration across sectors can foster innovative solutions and comprehensive strategies that are more effective in mitigating risks and enhancing benefits.<sup>66</sup> Digital literacy and wellbeing programs can equip young people and their families with the skills needed to navigate social media safely and effectively. These programs can address issues such as critical thinking, online safety and emotional regulation. Evidence suggests that such educational initiatives can significantly reduce the risks associated with social media use.<sup>67</sup> There is significant precedent in industry funding harm minimisation resulting from commercial activities, for example, the recently announced Industry Funding Model for Financial Counselling, and VicHealth’s establishment through a 5% levy on tobacco products under the Victorian Tobacco Act 1987.

**Impact:** A dedicated research fund will enable a deeper understanding of social media’s impact on mental health and facilitate increased development and dissemination of effective harm-minimisation resources. It ensures that policy and practice are informed by the latest evidence, leading to improved mental health outcomes for young Australians. This initiative will also support the development of targeted interventions for at-risk groups, enhancing their overall wellbeing and reducing the incidence of mental health issues related to social media use.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> E. Miller (2020). Social media use and adolescent mental health: Findings from the ABCD study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 66(5), S15–S16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.02.013>; and J. Torous, K. Jän Myrick, N. Rauseo-Ricupero & J. Firth (2020). Digital mental health and COVID-19: Using technology today to accelerate the curve on access and quality tomorrow. *JMIR Mental Health*, 7(3), e18848. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2196/18848>

<sup>67</sup> S. Livingstone, K. Ólafsson, E. J. Helsper, et al. (2017). Maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks for children online: The role of digital skills in emerging strategies of parental mediation. *Journal of Communication*, 67(1), 82–105. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12277>; and Ofcom (2019). *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2019*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcom.12277>

<sup>68</sup> Y. L. Chassiakos, J. Radesky, D. Christakis, et al. (2016). Children and adolescents and digital media. *Pediatrics*, 138(5), e20162593. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-2593>

## Conclusion

It is clear that, for too many people in Australia, social media is having a starkly negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. However, for many others it not only supports and facilitates help-seeking, but builds protective factors like connection, community, stigma reduction and mental health literacy.

We therefore believe that Australia must take a public health approach to regulation of social media that is co-designed with users, particularly young people, and rooted in harm minimisation. While proposals like social media bans may be appealing and are arising as a result of significant and justified community concerns especially by parents and caregivers, they risk inflicting serious unintended consequences on those they purport to benefit. Bans are highly likely to be circumvented and can *'prevent children discussing how they're using online spaces with the trusted adults in their lives and risks driving any subsequent social media use underground'*.<sup>69</sup> Many young people, particularly from marginalised groups, report that social media is one of the only places they have to build their identity, find connection and community, and feel included and accepted.

Therefore, we should be focusing on how we can improve social media platforms to ensure that the experiences people have on them are safe, positive and beneficial to their mental health and wellbeing.

Key to this is genuinely including all users, including young people, in the regulatory and policy processes in the months ahead. By including young people and other at-risk social media user groups through co-design processes we are more likely to achieve workable reforms that will deliver the improved safety outcomes we all want to see, while maintaining the many very positive benefits of social media use.

In fact, young people are already telling us what they want to see to improve their safety online – practical, implementable and sensible reforms such as giving them more control of algorithms and the content they see, easier recognition, verification and surfacing of credible mental health information, improved online safety education and limits on 'sticky' platform features like endless scrolling which experts also argue must be modified based on a users' social and cognitive abilities.<sup>70</sup>

We need to recognise that the primary responsibility for ensuring safety on social media platforms rests with social media companies. Social media companies must adopt safety-by-design principles when designing and updating their products.

And where social media companies are unlikely to act, the government should regulate to enforce greater safety for all users of social media platforms.

There also is much more that mental health services can do as well. That is why a new fund to support Australian mental health organisations to conduct research on the impacts of social media and to provide more resources and services direct to users on social media platforms.

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<sup>69</sup> Brennan & Perault. (2023). *Keeping Kids Safe Online: How Should Policymakers Approach Age Verification?* Logan, UT: The Center for Growth and Opportunity, Utah State University, United States.

<sup>70</sup> American Psychological Association. (2023). *Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence*. <https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use>