
SOCIAL MEDIA AND AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

ORYGEN AND HEADSPACE SUBMISSION

Orygen and headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on social media and Australian society. Social media is often raised as a factor contributing to rising rates of mental ill-health in young people, and we value the Committee's consideration of this issue in more detail.

We encourage the Committee to consider ways government can use policy and regulatory levers to support young people to benefit from social media use, while protecting them from the harms of social media and online platforms. Moving forward, policy approaches must be responsive to the shifting technological landscape and be grounded in evidence of young people's use. Our submission focuses on the terms of reference related to the use of age verification (a), digital platforms and mental health (d), and other issues relating to social media (e).

This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. Orygen and headspace acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pay respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen and headspace recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to Country, which continue to be important to the First Nations people living today.

ABOUT ORYGEN AND HEADSPACE

Orygen is the world's leading research and knowledge translation organisation focusing on mental ill-health in young people. At Orygen, our leadership and staff work to deliver cutting-edge research, policy development, innovative clinical services, and evidence-based training and education to ensure that there is continuous improvement in the treatments and care provided to young people experiencing mental ill-health.

Orygen conducts clinical research, runs clinical services (five headspace centres), supports the professional development of the youth mental health workforce and provides policy advice relating to young people's mental health. Our current research strengths include: early psychosis, mood disorders, personality disorders, functional recovery, suicide prevention, online interventions, neurobiology and health economics.

headspace is the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, providing early intervention mental health services to 12-to-25-year-olds. headspace has 160 services across Australia in metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and offers online and phone support services and digital resources through eheadspace. headspace provides multidisciplinary care for mental health, physical health, alcohol and other drug use, and work and study needs.

headspace's work builds the mental health literacy of young people and reduces stigma associated with mental health problems and the associated barriers to seeking help. Our work also involves supporting schools and their communities with expert advice and guidance on mental health and wellbeing, responding to loss through suicide, and providing support after major disaster events.

CONTACT DETAILS

For further information, please contact:

David Baker

Senior Manager, Policy

david.baker@orygen.org.au

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become ubiquitous within the lives of many young people, rapidly transforming the way young people communicate, consume media and access information. Research from the Australian eSafety Commissioner found that young people are spending an average of 14.4 hours a week online.(1) The online activities of young people are varied; however, social media remains a large part of the online experience. In Australia, young people aged between 12-to-13 years use an average of three social media platforms and those aged between 14-to-17 years on average use four or five platforms.(1) Social media use tends to increase with age, with young people aged 18-to-24 years reportedly using on average nearly twice as many social media platforms than young people aged 12-to-17 years.(2)

Alongside a rise in social media use, rates of mental ill-health among young people have risen in recent years, with young people reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety that exceed any time in the past. The headspace 2022 National Mental Health survey found that just under half of young people are experiencing high or very high psychological distress (47 per cent).(3) Further, the 2020-22 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing showed that 39 per cent of young people aged 16-to-24 years had experienced depression, an anxiety disorder and/or a substance use condition in the 12 months prior to being surveyed.(4) However, social media is not the only potential contributing factor to rises in mental ill-health among young people. The combination of risk factors for mental ill-health in young people are now further compounded by climate anxiety, job insecurity, cost-of-living and generational inequity.(5)

The rise in mental ill-health among young people has prompted significant public concern about the role of social media in either causing or contributing to poor mental health among young people. Research findings indicating negative impacts are frequently reported in newspapers and media outlets, creating a culture of 'moral panic' around young people's social media use, particularly by older generations who did not grow up in an online world.(5) Young people generally hold more nuanced and positive perspectives regarding the relationship between social media and mental health than older generations.(5-7) A 2023 study conducted by Orygen and the Policy Institute at Kings College London found that 76 per cent of Baby Boomers regarded social media as a key driver for poor mental health, compared with 54 per cent of Gen Z respondents.(8)

While the pervasive influence of social media on daily life is well-documented, its effects on the mental health and well-being of young people is still being understood.(9) In recent years, numerous research studies have sought to elucidate the relationship between social media use and mental ill-health in young people, however, the findings remain mixed.(5, 6, 10)

RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Young people's experience from social media depends on a range of factors, such as the amount of time online, the type of content consumed and the level of disruption to activities such as sleep and exercise.(10, 11) Applying the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, one in three (33 per cent) young people who responded to headspace's 2022 Survey were considered to have problematic social media use.(3) Some of the risks posed by problematic social media use include procrastination, social comparison, impacted sleep, exposure to disinformation, and decreased physical activity.(12) In addition to this, some young people may experience an increased risk for harm due to their individual vulnerabilities, cultural context, socio-economic status, age and gender.(5, 13). It is important to note

that risk does not equate to harm and young people display a range of digital skills to manage their safety online.

Image-focused platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram have shown stronger associations with negative mental health outcomes related to social comparison.(14, 15) Social comparison has been found to mediate the relationship between social media use and loneliness. While interactions and browsing activities on Instagram were generally associated with lower levels of loneliness, venting or posting without reciprocal interaction correlated with higher levels of loneliness. These findings highlight that young people with a greater vulnerability for social comparison may experience more adverse outcomes from social media use, illustrating the nuanced relationship between social media platforms, user traits, and mental health outcomes.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Young people can experience multiple benefits from using social media, including connecting with friends, creating content, making new connections around issues they care about, and learning from like-minded people.(12) Data from the Australian eSafety Commissioner found that 90 per cent of young people aged between 12-to-17 years engaged in at least one type of positive online behaviour, such as sharing uplifting content and supporting friends.(1)

Social media can also play a significant role in supporting the mental health of young people. Social media provides access to mental health information and can assist in the early identification of young people who may be at risk of harm.(12) Social media can also facilitate connection and social support for young people, both of which are important protective factors during the developmental stage of adolescence.(5, 10) When young people feel socially supported and connected, they are less likely to feel isolated. Social media can also provide young people with opportunities to safely explore and express different aspects of their identity. Authentic self-presentation via social media is positively correlated to improved wellbeing.(10) This is of particular importance for LGBTQIA+ young people, with 51 per cent stating that they feel more comfortable to be themselves online than in-person.(16)

MINIMISING THE HARM FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

A reaction to the potential harms is to propose that young people have restricted access to social media. However, young people have incorporated social media into their lives, as part of the broader embedding of digital technology as a central feature of education as well as communication within sporting and special interest clubs, and promotion of community activities. Further, there is mixed evidence that limiting or stopping use of social media will lead to improved mental health outcomes.(12) Banning social media presents its own risks, such as reduced help-seeking among young people.

Educating and empowering young people to use social media safely is more helpful and realistic. Building young people's digital skills can help them navigate the online world. This needs to be set within broader information and resources, though, given issues such as bullying or sharing of personal information without consent can often be happening in both online and offline environments.(12) Upskilling professionals (including mental health professionals) working with young people can also help young people manage the challenges of social media and online platforms.

It is unreasonable to expect young people, their families and people who work with young people to take all the responsibility for avoiding the harmful aspects of social media. Many young people believe there is not enough being done in terms of regulation and laws surrounding social media.(12) Social media and online platforms are commercial products designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible. There is a clear role for government in regulating the design and operations of social media and online platforms to understand, manage and report on the risks for young people, including mandating design features that enable young people to manage their use and minimise the risks rather than making proactive choices difficult to locate or enact.

THE USE OF AGE VERIFICATION TO PROTECT AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

Ensuring the safety of young people on social media requires strategic and effective action. Both young people and their parents and carers recognise the need for enhanced safety and privacy of young people online.(17) However, the proposed introduction of age verification to protect Australian children from social media is inadequate and places responsibility onto children, young people and their families. Age-based restrictions do not account for differences in the maturity of young people. In addition to this, it is uncertain how age verification can be safely implemented and enforced.(17) Age verification technology varies between platforms, leaving young people at potential risk for data breaches and misuse of personal information.(17)

The impact of restricting social media access will potentially impact some young people more than others. A 2023 study from the University of Sydney found that young people believe that age restrictions will lead to social exclusion and harm for some young people that use social media for support and connection.(17) This is echoed by evidence that indicates that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those residing in rural areas often rely on social media to maintain connection, relationships and access to mental health resources.(17, 18) Without adequate support systems in place, restricted access to social media could disproportionately disadvantage these groups of young people and result in digital exclusion and harm.

Young people and their parents and carers believe that the government should have a stronger role in ensuring the safety of young people online. Young people would like to see this achieved through education initiatives and increased accountability for safety placed upon social media platforms.(17) .

Young people already demonstrate a wide range of digital safety skills, such as not interacting with strangers and adjusting privacy settings. However, the safety issues impacting young people have shifted beyond traditional concerns and now centre around harmful content, data and privacy concerns. Both young people and their parents and carers have identified the need for more comprehensive online safety education and further support to manage online safety.(5, 17) Young people have stated that they want practical skills to navigate the challenges associated with algorithm design and harmful content. Research demonstrates that while parents and carers feel ill-informed to support young people in matters of online safety and rely upon schools, media and other expert sources for information and guidance.(17) Education initiatives in schools and other education settings would be best placed to lead this. These initiatives should be delivered across age-groups and be developmentally appropriate. Online safety education initiatives must be co-designed with young people and continually evaluated by young people to ensure their needs are met.(5)

This could be supported financially by imposing a tax on social media companies to fund youth mental health services and research, a proposal backed by Orygen and endorsed by a Policy Lab involving leading mental health organisations, young people, and their caregivers in Australia.(19)

Recommendation 1

Support the development and implementation of education initiatives co-designed with young people to equip them and their caregivers with online safety skills.

It is important that the content young people engage with on social media is age-appropriate and safety and privacy information is easy to understand. Social media is designed to capture and hold young people's attention, often leading to excessive usage through features like recommended content, push notifications, and infinite scrolling. These algorithm-driven features can increase the risk of harm by promoting exposure to distressing content. Transparency and accountability are integral to increasing young people's safety online. They not only ensure that social media platforms are operating according to safety standards, but also assist in educating and empowering young people around their online safety.

The concept of 'safety by design' has been identified as an ideal solution for young people. Safety by design minimises the potential for harm by integrating safety features directly into social media platform design. The eSafety Commissioner has previously identified that young people want social media platforms to increase their targeted safety features. Young people have said they want increased visibility and awareness of the terms and conditions of use, enhanced privacy features and improved safety monitoring.(17) In Australia, this could be achieved through the regulation of age-appropriate standards for social media platforms. Safety and privacy resources must be easy-to-understand, easily accessed by young people and straightforward. These features must be independently monitored and reviewed to ensure that these features remain age-appropriate and safe.

Recommendation 2

Develop age-appropriate standards for technology platforms. Such standards may include designing technology that is appropriate and safe for a young person's developmental stage, limit the use of features that attempt to maximize time, attention, and engagement.

Recommendation 3

Ensure that default settings for young people are set to the highest safety and privacy standards. Provide access to easy-to-read and highly visible information for young people regarding their safety and privacy.

THE ALGORITHMS, RECOMMENDER SYSTEMS AND CORPORATE DECISION MAKING OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN INFLUENCING WHAT AUSTRALIANS SEE, AND THE IMPACTS OF THIS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Social media has the potential to be a valuable tool for fostering social connections, providing mental health support, and enabling the sharing of resources to wide audiences. Despite these positive aspects, there are significant concerns about the exposure of young people to harmful content on these platforms. A central factor underpinning concerns about the harms of social media is the significant amount of unregulated and uncensored content that young people are exposed to daily, including graphic images of self-harm and suicide. Although some young people actively seek out such material, it often appears unsolicited in their newsfeeds. Frequent and pervasive exposure to this distressing content presents a serious social challenge, endangering the online safety of young people and justifying concerns about their exposure to harmful material.

The social media industry maximises young people's engagement through the exploitation of cognitive, social, and affective biases, resulting in compulsive usage patterns that prioritise profit over user well-being.(20) The financial gains of these companies are derived from maximising user screen time and interaction, mining user data, and repurposing this data for targeted advertising, often with little regard for the health and privacy impacts on the user.(20, 21)

Recommender systems significantly contribute to the spread and visibility of potentially harmful online content. These systems, which are designed to maximize user engagement, can inadvertently promote sensitive or graphic material. This is particularly troubling for young people who may already be vulnerable and more likely to engage with harmful content, thereby intensifying their distress or suicidal ideation. For example, a study in the United Kingdom (5,294 young people), found that 75 per cent had encountered self-harm content online before turning 14. Among those exposed to self-harm and suicide-related material, 83 per cent had not actively searched for it, with many reporting that it worsened their mood and led them to self-harm in similar or more severe ways.(22)

Additional reports indicate that on platforms such as TikTok, teenagers encounter mental health-related content approximately every 39 seconds, and content related to suicide every 2 minutes and 36 seconds.(23) Distressing content is among the most viewed online, and despite ongoing calls for regulation, recommender systems continue to facilitate its rapid spread.(24) There is a need for better

mechanisms to help users quickly and easily avoid or remove such content to improve their online experience and safety. The social media industry's prioritisation of user attention above all else is likely detrimental to youth mental health, with particularly with greater harm to those who are more vulnerable. Reporting requirements should create accountability for behavioural expectations established by regulation, and against provider's own codes of conduct.

Young people should be empowered to make their own choices about what they engage with online, just as they would in other areas of life. This gives them agency as well as provoking mindful engagement and informed decision-making, and supports sharing of responsibilities between providers and users.

Recommendation 4

Regulate and include a mechanism for independent review and evaluation of the content of random, anonymised social media feeds of young people at different time points.

Recommendation 5

Social media companies should have stronger reporting guidelines. Social media companies must share data relevant to the mental health impact of their platforms for independent impact assessment and public reporting.

Recommendation 6

Social media companies should enable and promote simple controls for young people to stop 'infinite' scroll settings; set content feed to be limited to accounts they are following; and show content in a chronological order that identifies when they have seen all new content.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAN FACILITATE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Recent research indicates that ethically conscious social media-based interventions can effectively promote health and wellbeing. These interventions enable support networks, normalise mental health challenges, foster social connection and a sense of belonging, and encourage engagement with online therapy.(25, 26) Social media is both cost-effective and accessible, meeting young people where they are at.

In 2018, Orygen partnered with young people to develop the #chatsafe program to provide support to young people who may be responding to suicide related content or wish to share their own experiences. The #chatsafe guidelines also provide assistance to people who support young people. Orygen has developed the MOST platform, which includes a safe, moderated social network where young people can build peer-to-peer connections. Research shows this plays a crucial role in supporting young people on their mental health journey. Since 2020 MOST has been available to over 10,000 young Australians. headspace also uses advertising on social media platforms to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma; headspace's ads on topics like mental health tips, work and study planning and available headspace supports have been viewed more than 11.5 million times between January and May this year. Orygen and headspace welcome further discussion with the Committee regarding these initiatives.

Mental health organisations are well placed to provide social media education to young people using their services. Moving forward, mental health organisations should provide young people with information that is co-designed with young people and clinicians to ensure it is effective and relevant.

Recommendation 7

Partner with youth mental health organisations to provide social media related education to young people using their services.

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