



POLICY BRIEF:

The impact of screen time and social media on the mental health of young Australians



MAY 2024

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Top 5 health risks of social media

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how do we wean children off?

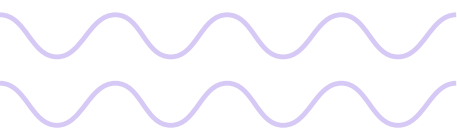
SOCIAL NETWORKING

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INTERNET ADDICTION

Does Excessive Screen Time Cause ADHD?

Social media spreads "extreme, inappropriate, and harmful" content to adolescents, says surgeon general



Acknowledgements

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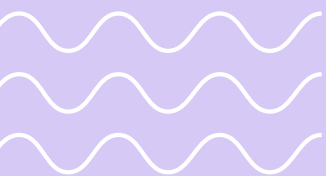
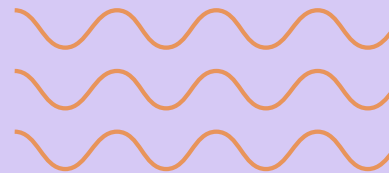
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Finally, we would like to thank the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, Orygen, ReachOut and the Butterfly Foundation for their feedback on earlier drafts of this brief.



The 252 page US National Academy of Sciences Consensus Study Report released in 2024, states that

“the committee recognized that the temptation to draw causal inference and to call for rapid action around social media is strong, and heard, during public sessions, from a range of academics and activists who feel strongly that causal links between social media and mental health have been unequivocally established and that there is an urgent need for action. And yet, in careful deliberation and review of the published literature, the committee arrived at more measured conclusions.¹”



Introduction



If you have read the news lately – you will have seen the headlines – “we have a youth mental health crisis”, “screens are stealing childhood”, “screen time impacts mental health”, “all screens are toxic for teen mental health” and so on.

The first headline is indeed supported by a range of robust statistics. Young people *are* reporting symptoms of psychological distress and rates of depression and anxiety disorders that exceed any time in the past. For example, the 2020–2022 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing showed that 39% of young Australians aged 16–24 years had experienced depression, an anxiety disorder and/or a substance use condition in the 12 months prior to being surveyed by trained mental health interviewers using reliable and validated diagnostic questionnaires.²

This equates to 1.2 million young Australians and represents **a massive 50% increase in the prevalence of these conditions since 2007** (see Figure 1).

Multiple self-report surveys paint a similar picture of rising rates of psychological distress over the past 15 years.^{3–6} For example, recent data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey show that almost half (42.3%) of young people aged 15–24 were psychologically distressed in 2021, up from 18.4% in 2011 (see Figure 2).⁷ Moreover, there seems to be a clear cohort effect with data showing that individuals born in the 1990s (“millennials”) have experienced a much greater decline in their mental health compared to any other age cohort.⁸

But while it’s fair to say that we are experiencing a crisis in young people’s mental health, the claims about smartphone and social media’s contribution to this crisis are more contentious.

Figure 1: Data from the 1997, 2007, and 2020-22 ABS national surveys of mental health and wellbeing showing the prevalence of depression, anxiety and substance use conditions among females and males aged 16–24 years.

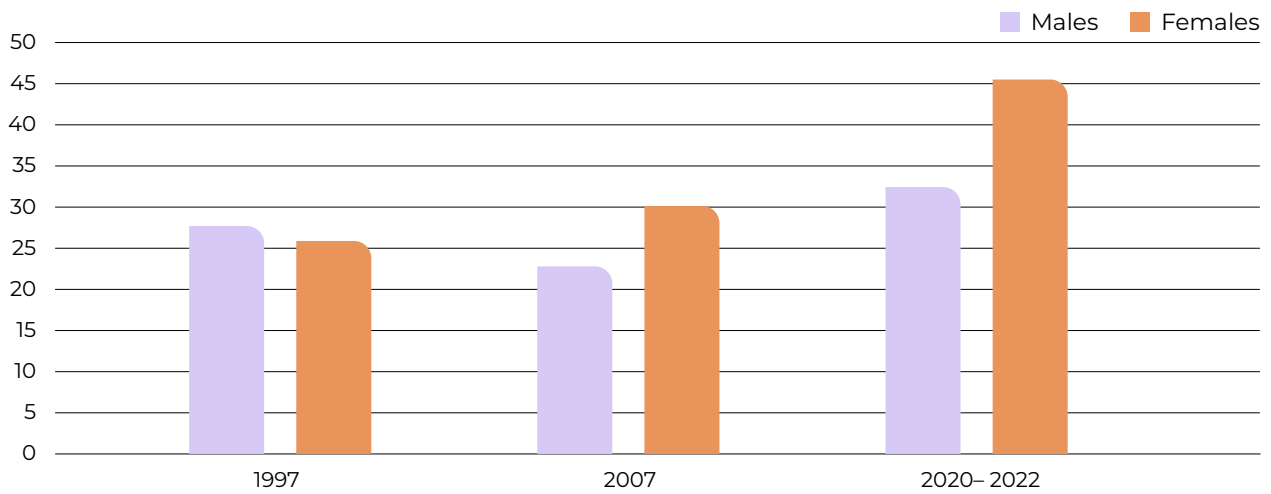
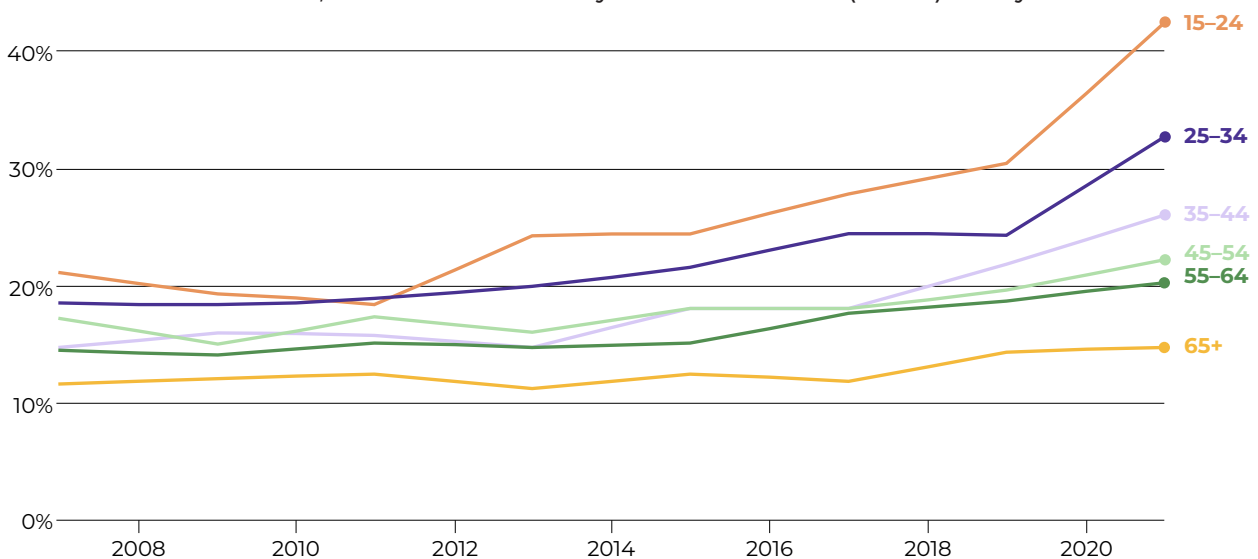


Figure 2: The prevalence (percentage) of psychological distress by age group. Data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.⁷



The decline in young people’s mental health in Australia (and several other countries), did start to happen around the same time that young people began to access smartphones and modern-day social media platforms in large numbers. Facebook and YouTube launched in 2005, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2012 and TikTok in 2017.

However, correlation does not prove causation and in fact the research literature paints a much more nuanced picture of the benefits and risks associated with screen time and social media and the alarmist headlines do not consider the other complex personal and societal factors that also influence young people’s mental wellbeing that have changed over the same time. Feedback from young people echoes these sentiments.

“There is an overly pessimistic narrative surrounding digital technology that prevents society from harnessing social media to benefit mental health.”

Prevention United Youth Advisory Group (YAG) Member

This policy brief explores both the benefits and risks to young people’s mental health associated with smartphone and social media use and discusses the ways in which we can harness the positive aspects of the digital environment, while averting or minimising the potential mental health harms associated with the online world among young Australians.

Use and attitudes towards smartphones and social media



Patterns of use

Smartphones are ubiquitous and an increasing proportion of children and young people are using smartphones. Data from the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) shows that just under half of young people aged 6–13 years own or use a smartphone.⁹ Likewise, a 2022 survey of adults, parents, teachers/carers/supervisors, and children aged 8 to 17 years (n= 6,434) found that 62.4% of children have their own mobile phone, a significant increase from 52.8% in 2020. By the time a child reaches 16 to 17 years, all children (100%) have devices that are not shared with others.¹⁰ Among adults, some estimates suggest that almost 100% of Australians aged 18–74 own a smartphone.¹¹

Children and young people use smartphones for a range of reasons – to communicate with friends and family, play online games, use apps, read online news and information, and to access social media.

The American Psychological Association defines social media as “forms of digital communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content”.

While there is no legislated minimum age to open an account, most social media companies set a minimum age of 13 years. However, without robust age verification it is hard to gauge how many children under the age of 13 are actively using social media platforms, and some research suggests that children’s access to these online spaces is starting at increasingly younger ages.¹² One report from the USA found that 38% of 8–12 year reported using social media.¹³

In Australia, data from the Australian eSafety Commissioner suggests that adolescents (aged 12–17-years) are spending on average 14.4 hours a week online. The most popular online activities are researching topics of interest, watching videos, chatting with friends, listening to music, and gaming. Four main social media platforms are used by adolescents – YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.

Prevention United's Youth Advisory Group (YAG) notes that young people are also using other platforms including Reddit, Discord, Pinterest and Twitch. Indeed, the digital world is dynamic and social media products are ever evolving leading to rapid changes in patterns of social media use. For example, between 2017 and 2020 video-based platform TikTok saw a 26% increase to make it the 6th most used platform in 2020.¹⁴

There are also significant gendered differences in the way social media is used. A 2018 survey found that young Australian women aged 14–24 years spend on average 13.5 hours a week on social media. This is around 5 hours more than young men of the same age.¹⁵ Data from a survey of 627 Australian adolescents found that males spent more time online playing multiplayer games and more time reading news online than females.¹⁴ Furthermore, boys aged 14+ use video games up to 5 times more than girls, although the number of females gaming online is increasing.¹⁶

It's important to note that young people are not the only ones using smartphones to access the internet and social media. A significant proportion of adults regularly engage with these platforms. In their review of the digital lives of Australians, ACMA found that the majority of adults were connected to social networking platforms, with around 85% of adults aged 18–34 and 67% of those over the age of 35 years reporting use of at least one platform in the previous 6 months.¹⁷ These data are important to consider when reviewing claims that smartphones and/or social media use are the cause of poor mental health, given there has been little to no increase in depression and anxiety among these older age cohorts.⁷

Attitudes towards technology and social media

The ACMA review also found that young people generally have more positive attitudes to digital technology than older generations. For example, 60% of young adults aged 18–34 years felt that computers and technology gave them more control over their lives, while only 44% of Australians over the age of 35 years felt the same.¹⁷

Concerns about the online world and social media also vary by age. ReachOut recently surveyed 631 parents and carers of young Australians (aged 12–18 years).



Almost 2 in 5 parents/carers (59%) reported that they were concerned about social media use, in particular the amount of time young people were spending online, online safety and the “addictiveness” of activities.¹⁸ By contrast, earlier data collected from young people (aged 16–25 years) tell a different story, with only 34% of young people selecting social media as an issue of concern. In fact, social media ranked 24th in a list of issues young people were worried about, ranking well below concerns around cost of living, loneliness, and study/exam stress.¹⁹

An online survey conducted by Orygen and the Policy Institute (Kings College London) involving 2,007 adults in Australia aged 16+ and 2,516 adults in the UK aged 18+, also found marked differences in the way that younger and older generations think about social media. Social media was regarded as a key driver for poor youth mental health by older generations with 76% of Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) and 67% of Gen X's (born 1965–1980) saying that social media has had a negative impact on the mental health of young people. In contrast, only 54% of individuals in the Gen Z cohort (born 1997–2009) said that social media use was a driver of poor mental health. Younger generations – Gen Z and Millennials (born 1981–1996) were more likely to report benefits associated with social media and the online world, for example, self-expression, community building, emotional support and managing loneliness.²⁰

Overall, it's clear that young people are avid users of smartphones and social media platforms and the way they use these platforms is quite dynamic. They also generally have more favourable attitudes to these platforms than older generations. The question is – what are the benefits and risks associated with screen time and social media, and what influence is the online world having on their mental health?

What are the benefits and risks of social media?



Potential benefits associated with social media use

For many young people, social media provides a digital space where they can connect, interact, share experiences, offer and seek support, form communities, and establish a collective voice for advocacy. They are also platforms where young people can access news, information, entertainment and much more.¹⁴

Prevention United's YAG members outlined a range of benefits that they experience online. These included boosting creativity, finding inspiration (e.g., fashion, music and art), learning new skills, promoting personal projects, having fun, facilitating humour, supporting identity and political exploration, body positivity, accessing education and information on a range of topics (e.g., neurodivergence, news, politics, human rights), keeping up to date with news, making connections, keeping in touch with friends, socialising, and feeling less lonely (see Figure 3).

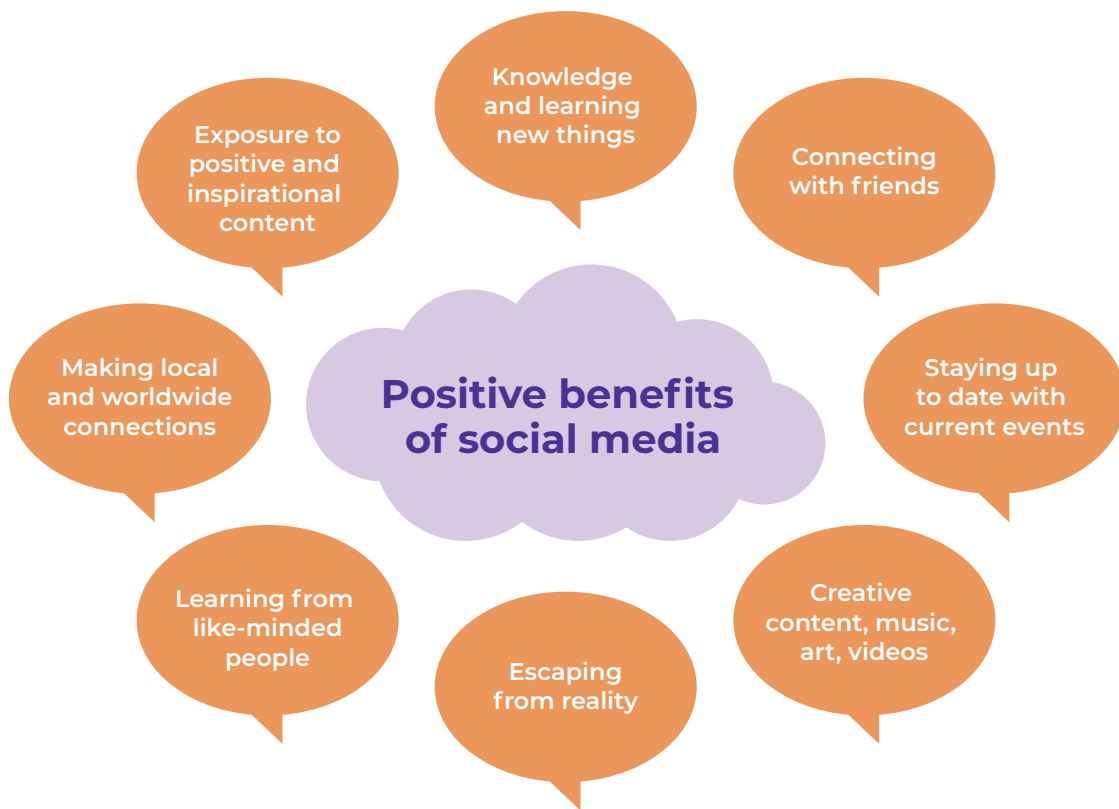
“I feel like social media is like the digital version of a book. I can learn a lot of useful knowledge from social media. Sometimes, I feel satisfied by scrolling the reels or the posts on social media.”

Prevention United YAG member

“Social media can play a supportive role in our education and mental health; this is rarely communicated.”

Prevention United YAG member

Figure 3. The positive impacts of social media identified by the Prevention United YAG.



Other data supports their perspective. For example, data from the Australian eSafety Commissioner (2020) found that 90% of teens (aged 12 to 17 years) surveyed were engaging in at least one type of positive online behaviour (e.g., being inclusive and supporting friends).¹⁴ Likewise, a recent UNICEF survey of 1,000+ young Australians aged 15–17 years found that 81% of social media users say it has a positive influence on their lives.²¹

Other research shows that social media use is associated with social connectedness and a sense of community which can help to reduce loneliness among young people.²² These benefits are particularly evident among young people who are at risk of social isolation and/or social exclusion because of diversity or geography. Table 1 summarises some of the research on the benefits that social media can have on the lives of young people who belong to diverse or marginalised communities.

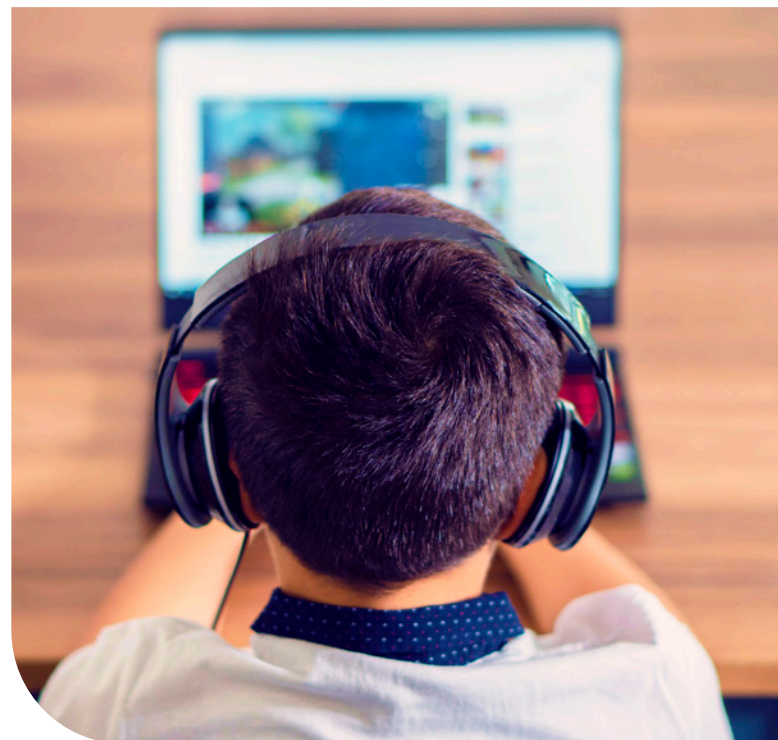


Table 1: Some of the benefits associated with social media use.

Population	Benefits
First Nations Youth	Self-determination through content creation and education, re-establishing kinship ties/social connections, connecting with elders on collaborative projects, healing and uniting dislocated communities. ^{23,24}
Refugee and asylum seeker youth	Addressing complex mental health challenges, maintaining a sense of social connectedness, storytelling, sharing lived experience, engagement and sense of belonging. ²⁵
LGBTQIA+ youth	Access to safe spaces to experiment with identity and orientation, connection to community, peer socialisation and support to circumvent and mitigate physical and emotional safety issues ²⁶ , decreased feelings of social isolation. ²⁷
Rural youth	Bridging information gaps between rural and urban students, decreased feelings of social isolation. ²⁸
Neurodivergent young people	Connection, understanding and a means of reframing societal perceptions of neurologically based conditions such as autism in a positive way. ²⁹
Disabled young people	Enhanced social participation, better sense of independence and autonomy, improved literacy skills. ³⁰
Young people with lived and living experience of mental ill-health	Informational and emotional support, sharing and learning from experiences, anonymity, ease of access, a sense of connectedness and reduced feelings of isolation. ³¹
Young people at risk of disordered eating	The body positivity movement, when led by people in larger bodies has been used to improve awareness of bodily diversity, reduce stigma and create a community of support. ³² The #bodypositive hashtag has over 19.3 million posts on Instagram alone.

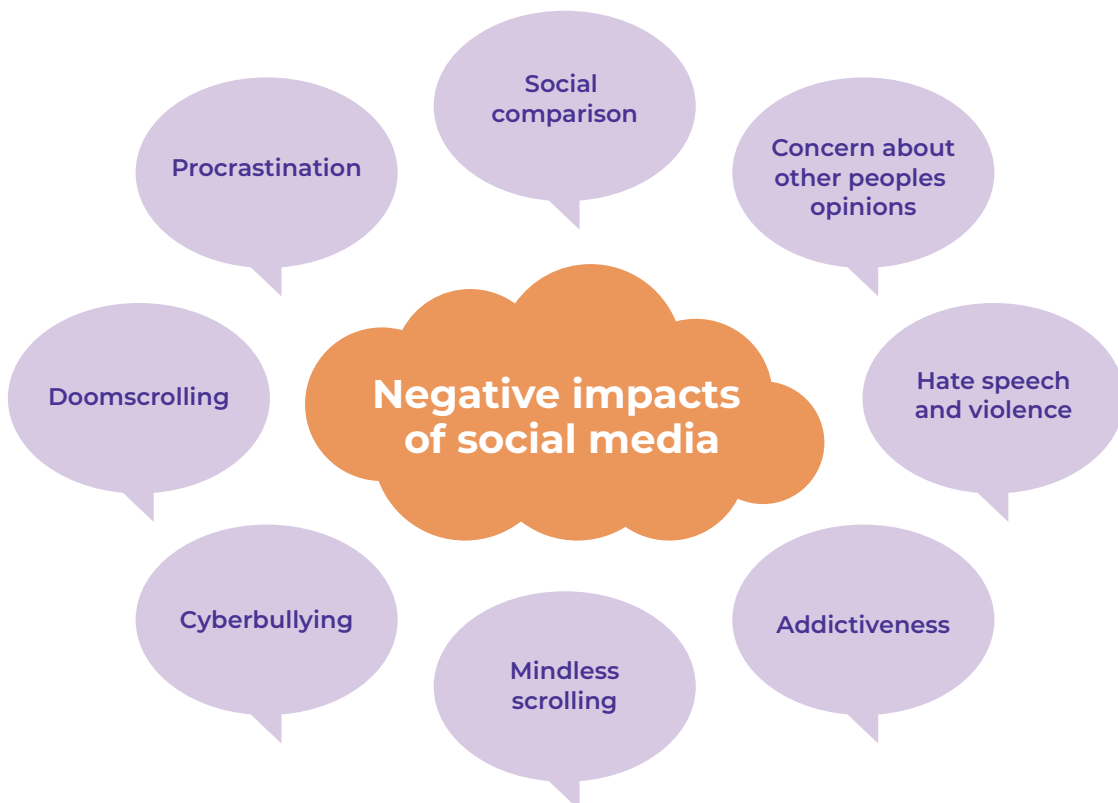




Potential risks associated with social media use

While there may be benefits linked to young people's use of social media, there are also potential risks and harms associated with its use. Prevention United's YAG members highlighted a range of problems that they experience online. These are depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The negative impacts of social media identified by the Prevention United YAG.



Once again, the research supports many of these statements. Online risks are problems that can be *potentially* harmful to children. However, a child will not necessarily experience harmful consequences when exposed to online risks. By contrast, harm is defined as “a negative consequence for a child’s emotional, psychical, or mental wellbeing”.³³ [The CO:RE classification of online risks](#) outlines five major types of risk, all of which are related to mental health. Examples of these risks are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Types of risks that a young person may be exposed to online as defined by The CO:RE classification of online risks.

Type of risk	Example
Content	A child is exposed to or engages with content that is potentially harmful (e.g., violent or sexual content, online harm or violence from others, hate speech, harmful stereotypes, discrimination and exposure to false information).
Contact	A child is targeted by or experiences harmful contact from an adult (e.g., online stalking, sexual harassment).
Conduct	A child is a victim of, engages in or participates in harmful peer content such as cyberbullying.
Contract	A child is exploited by or exposed to potential harms such as fraud, account hacking or financial scams.
Cross-cutting	A child is exposed to privacy violations (e.g., leaks of images) or risks to mental health that do not fit into a single category.

Time online is also an issue. Excess screentime is associated with reduced sleep, reduced exercise, and a decline in face-to-face social interactions. These are all known protective factors for positive mental health.³⁴ There is also a risk of online addiction.

Social media platforms are deliberately designed to maintain users’ attention and engagement through the unpredictable delivery and discovery of new content. Features such as the ‘infinite scroll’ and engagement elements that take advantage of people’s psychological tendencies for social validation and reciprocity (e.g., the ability to view and check “likes” and comments) are also platform design features that are concerning.

The Australian eSafety Commissioner has released a position statement on [Recommender systems and algorithms](#) which outlines how content curation systems and underlying algorithms prioritise content or make recommendations. Young Australians are susceptible to these design elements and 65% of young people report that they are likely to spend more time than intended on social media.³⁵

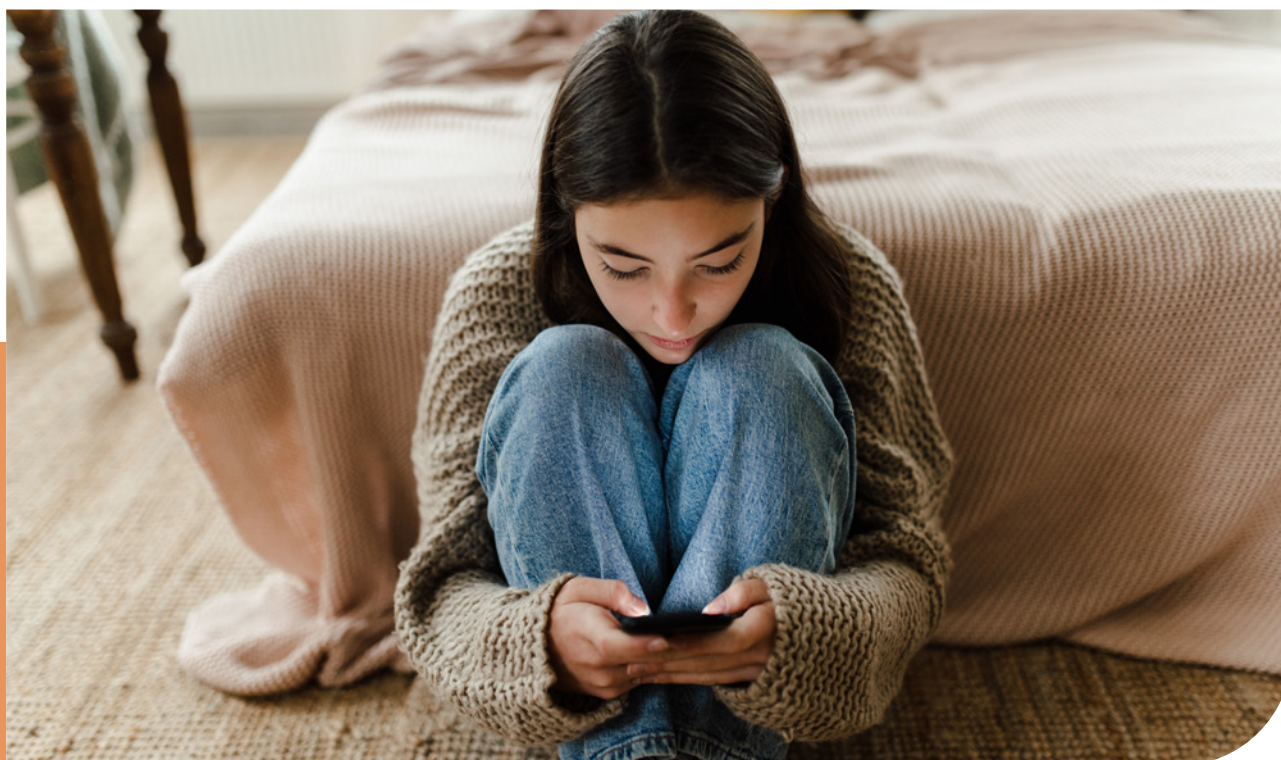
“It's like the six second videos you kind of get drawn into because you have this whole big hit of dopamine. And then when I'm trying to study, when I'm trying to really focus hard, I can't ... it's just there and it is easy to get stuck in it. And I realize I'm not even having fun, but I just can't put it down.”

Prevention United YAG member

Moreover, lack of control of the content viewed online is a problem since algorithms on social media can drive extreme content to users including misogynistic content and misleading or unhelpful information about body image, mental health conditions, and suicidality. Table 3 summarises some of the risks that social media use can have for young people.

Table 3: Some of the risks associated with social media use.

Risk	Impact
Body image/ eating disorders	Influencers on appearance-focused platforms play a significant role in the promotion on unrealistic representations of bodies, including through 'inspo' and 'fitspo' content, as well as those who directly promote problematic eating disorder content (e.g., 'pro-ana' and 'pro-mia' posts). ^{36,37} Exposure to image-related content on body image and food choices is associated with higher body dissatisfaction, dieting/restricting food and overeating. ³⁸
Cyberbullying	Perpetrators can access and specifically target individuals on social media. The anonymity of platforms may embolden perpetrators and cyberbullying is often an extension of face-to-face bullying. ³⁹ Social media may be considered a "new tool to harm victims already bullied by traditional means". ⁴⁰
Online harassment/abuse	Being on social media may increase the risk of being abused or harassed online, particularly for young women. ⁴¹ There is growing evidence of online harassment and abuse of LGBTQ+ gamers. ⁴²
Disinformation	Social media provides (free) access to online information including mental health advice, however, much of it has not been created by experts or health professionals, and can be factually inaccurate. ⁴³
Social Media Addiction (SMA)	Excessive use of social media (driven by design algorithms) can lead to problematic social media use or social media addiction (SMA).
Decrease in quality sleep	Habitual use of social media at bedtime can contribute to poor sleep, which in turn can lead to a greater risk of mental health conditions developing. ⁴⁴
Decrease in physical activities/exercise	Time on social media reduces young people's participation in physical activities which may contribute to a decline in mental health. ⁴⁵



What impact do these factors have on young people's mental health?



While there are both potential benefits and potential risks associated with social media use, determining what influence these factors have on young people's mental health is complicated. As a result, the nature of the impact of screentime and social media on young people's mental health is the subject of considerable debate.

Before we examine this issue, it is important to reflect on the way research in this area is conducted. There are two main categories of research – observational research and experimental research. Observational research designs, such as cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal studies, are used to look for links or associations between different naturally occurring variables, but they can't tell us if a certain factor *causes* another. By contrast, experimental studies allow us to establish cause and effect.

For example, a community survey that asks young people how much time they spend on social media and whether they are experiencing any depressive symptoms can be used to establish whether there is an association between social media use and depressive symptoms. However, it can't 'prove' that the former causes the later. It could be that young people with depression spend more time on social media, or it could be that another confounding factor causes both (e.g., loneliness).

By contrast, an experimental study in which one group of young people with no symptoms of depression are randomly assigned to a situation where they are asked to engage with high levels of social media use over a month, and another similar group is randomly assigned to experience no social media use, can be used to establish whether high levels of social media cause depressive symptoms to emerge. To date, most of the research on screen time and social media and mental health has been correlational rather than experimental research.^{46,47}

Study design is only one issue that we need to keep in mind when reviewing the evidence around screentime and youth mental health. Study quality is another major issue. Regrettably many studies in this field are hampered by poor quality designs including inadequate control for confounding variables such as extent of use, type of use, mental health history, and exposure to other known risk factors for mental ill-health. This can increase the risk of error or bias and make it hard to be confident about a study's findings.^{48,49} The other issue to consider is what outcome is being measured. For example, some studies have assessed the links between screen time and/or social media on mental wellbeing while others have focused on the links with mental ill-health, typically depression or anxiety.



Given this complexity, it is perhaps not surprising that overall, research into the influence of screentime and social media on young people's mental health and wellbeing has produced conflicting findings, and different researchers have arrived at different conclusions.⁵⁰ Some studies have found a positive link between screen time and mental ill-health, others have found no links or the opposite link.⁵¹ Likewise, some studies looking more specifically at social media use and mental ill-health, have also shown mixed results, or only a weak positive correlation.^{52,53}

The more research that accrues, the more it appears the links between the online world and youth mental health are not as straightforward or as strong as people may think. A recent meta-analysis that reviewed 33 studies published between 2015 and 2019 that examined the link between the level of screen time and mental ill-health concluded that "At present, there does not appear to be robust evidence to suggest that screen time is associated with, let alone a cause of, mental health problems".⁵¹ Likewise, an umbrella review of 25 narrative reviews, systematic reviews and meta-analyses that looked at social media and mental health, found that most reviews describe the associations as "weak" or "inconsistent".⁵⁴



What might be causing these discrepancies?



Young people's online experiences are a result of a combination of their personal choices and digital affordances, meaning their experience will be affected by both the way that they shape their online experiences (e.g., what games they play online, who they decide to like and follow) and the features that are built into social media platforms.⁵⁵

Most studies in this field look at aggregate effects, yet not all young people use social media in the same way and/or they may not necessarily be equally susceptible to any negative impacts.⁵⁶ Indeed, it appears that any negative impacts of screentime and social media vary between individuals and depend on several factors such as the young person's age, gender, personality traits, education, the type and extent of their use, and their life experiences and socioeconomic circumstances.

Age is an important factor. Young people are hypersensitive to social feedback, praise and attention from peers.⁵⁷ Underdeveloped executive function skills (e.g., impulse control) and neurobiological changes that occur in adolescence⁵⁸ make it more difficult for young people to set time limits, disengage from social media and ignore push notifications that are designed to be distracting.⁵⁹

Young people who face significant difficulties in their life (e.g. communication difficulties, experience of childhood maltreatment, exposure to violence, family breakdown, lack of family support, and social disadvantage) or who have mental health or physical health conditions are likely to experience increased risks online.⁶⁰



For example, studies show that young people from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are more likely to have access to screens in their bedroom, spend more time on screen-based activities, and have an increased risk of social media addiction than young people from higher SES backgrounds.^{61,62} Other research reports a strong association between low SES and the number of negative experiences online (e.g., “unwanted attention from others”), which may increase the risk of poor mental health.⁶³ Likewise, the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study (ABCD Study®), which includes a nationally representative sample of 11,875 USA participants aged 9–10 years, found a moderate association between higher levels of screentime and poor sleep, academic performance and mental health; however, the effect sizes were modest and the young person’s SES was more strongly associated with each outcome measure.⁶⁴ Other research finds that heavy digital media use is three times higher among youth who experienced ≥ 4 adverse childhood experiences than among young people who experienced none. Family resilience, connection and parenting stress appear to be significant mediators of the association between adverse childhood experiences and heavy digital media use.⁶⁵

This aligns with the “differential susceptibility to media effects model” proposed by Valkenburg and Peter⁶⁶ which posits that the effects of social media (positive or negative) depend on a range of individual variables and social context. The model illustrates the individual nuance required to understand how social media impacts young people differently.⁶⁶ The construct of “social media sensitivity” has been introduced to better understand how associations between social media and wellbeing differ across people and contexts.⁶⁷

Last, it is worth noting that one large study found that social media use was associated with greater safety. A 2022 survey of 7,000 teenagers by the US Center for Disease Control found that teens who were online regularly are more likely to be depressed, but 41% less likely to die by suicide and 62% less likely to be hospitalised for self-harm than peers who were depressed but spent less time online.⁶⁸ The reasons for this are not known, but it is likely that individuals go online to connect with people and get support through tough times.

How should we respond to these potential benefits and risks?



Young Australians are doing it tough, and we urgently need to understand what is causing the rise in psychological distress, depression and anxiety conditions among this age group and work to address these problems. Social media has been raised as a potential ‘culprit’ and the US Surgeon General issued an advisory warning in 2023 about social media and noted that “Nearly every teenager in America uses social media, and yet we do not have enough evidence to conclude that it is sufficiently safe for them”.⁶⁹

The research suggests that the situation is more complex, and we need to be wary of quick fixes that target one possible problem, while other well-established causes of mental health risk factors – like child maltreatment^{70,71} – remain unaddressed. Given the complex relationship between social media and youth mental ill-health, it’s clear that we also need to avoid ‘one size fits all’ policy solutions and instead take a more nuanced approach.

Digital technology is now embedded in young people lives (and the lives of adults around them) and it is highly unlikely that they or other age group will stop using social media platforms or other digital technologies anytime soon. It also needs to be remembered that many reputable mental health organisations are active on social media, and there are benefits in supporting young people to engage with these platforms. Moreover, several mental health organizations have partnered with social media platforms to design built in safety measures specifically to prevent risk (e.g., Orygen’s #chatsafe guidelines).

Blanket bans and other prohibitionist responses are not the answer. In developing policy solutions, we also need to recognise that the online world is complex and constantly changing. Set and forget solutions won't work. Instead, we need to constantly monitor and adapt responses as new data or research emerges, and as the online environment evolves.

“‘Social media detox’ as the main solution to how youth can manage their mental health is kinda boring and overused narrative. Also comes off as dismissive of how youth often use social media to connect to peers/communities that are important to them.”

Prevention United YAG Member

“If a problem arises from social media, we are told to delete it, which is just not a reality, instead we should be taught how to tailor it to us and use it effectively. I don't like hearing that all problems for young people come from social media, when we use social media as an escape from our troubles.”

Prevention United YAG Member

We also must involve young people. Young people have considerable 'living experience' of how these platforms operate and decision makers are unlikely to come up with acceptable and effective solutions unless they hear what young people have to say and co-design responses with them.

Based on the available evidence it appears that our main efforts on this issue should be directed towards providing young people (and their parents/carers) with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to stay safe online and have a healthy relationship with screentime and social media, and in regulating social media products much as we regulate other products – like gambling and alcohol – that can be harmful, regardless of whether only some individuals experience these harms.

We need to keep and amplify the benefits that the digital environment can offer young people, while working to prevent or minimise the things that can cause harm. We also need to recognise that the online environment is not dramatically different to the offline environment, and we need to look at how we can simultaneously improve both. Fixing the online world is no guarantee of good mental health, when young people are still confronted with an array of other negative influences on their mental wellbeing 'offline' (e.g., see our Discussion Paper on these causes [Reimagining Youth Mental Health](#)).



Increasing young people’s digital skills

Young people need a range of digital skills to navigate social media and the online world, including digital literacy and online communication skills. There is also a need for parents to have access to education so that they can discuss social media with the young person in their life and offer practical advice and support.

Online safety is only one component of protecting young people’s wellbeing online, although it’s important to note that safety issues play out across both online and offline settings. Research by Project Rockit and the Young and Resilient Research Centre found that rather than focusing education efforts on managing (extreme) risks in just one environment, that young people want information about common issues that happen in any environment (e.g., connecting and interacting with others and navigating the complexities of social relationships rather than worrying so much about cyberbullying and online grooming). Young people are also interested in issues around consent and agency regarding personal information (in both the online and offline world), getting support and supporting others.

Five essential skills were recognised as being necessary to navigate online and offline worlds. These were effective communication, building respectful relationships, establishing, maintaining and respecting boundaries, cultivating resilience and thinking critically. Young people did not feel that conventional online safety education was providing this information and instead the focus tended to highlight an intergenerational divide and reinforced the idea that “adults don’t get it”.⁷² This disconnect is depicted in Figure 5 below.

When we asked the Prevention United YAG members about this issue, they raised similar themes around education, empowerment, and the ability to customise online experiences. They want the skills to navigate the online world safely and deal with the challenges associated with persuasive design, algorithms that drive harmful content, disinformation, advertising, and exposure to negative content. They also want practical skills such as the ability to identify fake accounts, recognise disinformation and report or block content, recognise unhealthy internet use (e.g., social comparison and addiction) and support friends who may be struggling.

Online safety is taught as part of the Australian school curriculum*; however, this may not be enough to ensure that every young person has the skills to keep themselves safe online. The online world is a rapidly changing space, and curriculum-based interventions need to be continually evaluated by young people to ensure their needs are met. The views of the Prevention United YAG are summarised in Figure 6.

“I know for me, it was like when I was reading through the harms, I was kind of zoning out because we’ve heard a lot of that already...”

Prevention United YAG Member

Figure 5: Young people’s experience of online safety education versus their experience of risk in the real world (modified from Project Rockit)

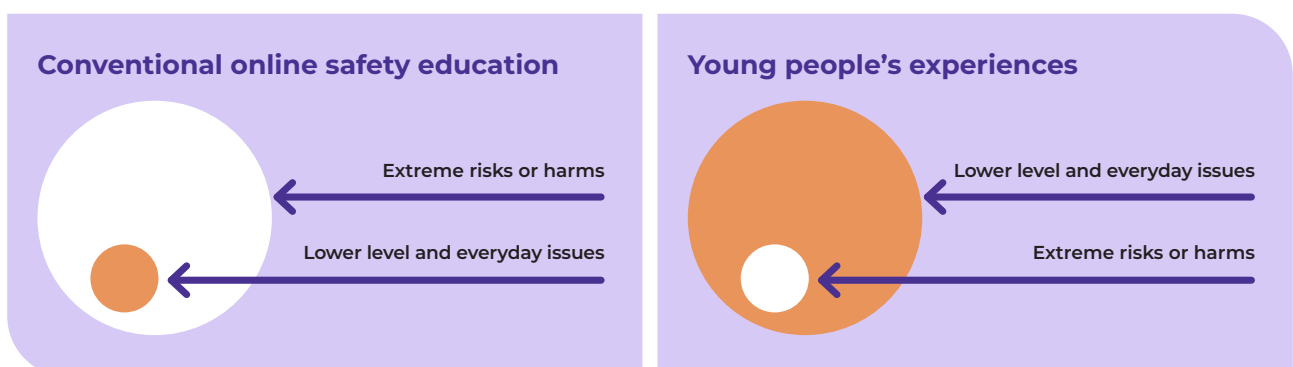


Figure 6: Prevention United YAG – What young people want for safe online experiences



There is also a need to upskill professionals who work with young people facing challenges associated with the online world. Professional training in digital literacy should be included in accreditation pathways and be ongoing. Moreover, professionals and mental health organisations must consider their own digital and social media presence and accountability when offering and recommending apps and online resources. The EU YSkills project drew on interview data from 62 young people from Norway and the UK with a range of mental health difficulties to create informational resources for mental health professionals who support young people navigating their digital lives (see [Mental health and digital skills](#)).

Regulating social media companies

While social media platforms may be “free”, they are commercial products that are designed with the deliberate aim of maintaining users’ attention and engagement to harvest data and support advertising.⁷³ The presence and purpose of ‘built-in’ design features that aim to keep users engaged and online for as long as possible and that have known harmful effects have been highlighted by industry whistle-blowers who have also claimed companies are actively hiding data that shows the mental health harms their platforms are having on young people.⁷⁴

The landscape is complex and rapidly changing and there is little transparency regarding what tech companies are doing to make their platforms safer.⁷⁵ Profits seem to be prioritised over people. A study that involved public health researchers and legal scholars to develop strategies to regulate the use of algorithms on social media platforms found that social media companies generate \$11 billion a year from minors and have minimal incentive to curb harmful practices.⁷⁶ It appears that social media companies will only act if they are forced to act.

Different countries around the world are recognising the problems associated with these platforms and are now attempting to regulate the online world and protect the safety of users in a range of different ways. There are a wide range of issues to consider. Examples include global regulatory trends for online safety, stricter content-moderation policies that take user age into account when designing platforms and algorithms, mobile phone and platform bans (where appropriate), restriction of ads targeting children, privacy protections, safety by-design features and children’s rights to participation and having their voice heard.⁷⁷ In Australia, young people and others are protected by the eSafety Commissioner and the Online Safety Act (2021) that makes service providers accountable for the online safety of users.⁷⁸

Summary and recommendations



The research relating to the digital world and youth mental health is complex and inconsistent, and it appears that there are both benefits and risks associated with young people's use of social media and online platforms.

The question, "does social media cause mental ill-health?" is perhaps not the right one to ask, and it might be better to ask why some young people struggle online while others thrive, and what can we do to accentuate the positives, and eliminate the negatives associated with this environment which is here to stay. Adolescence is a time of complex neurobiological change and there are a range of mechanisms by which screen time and use of social media could amplify developmental changes that increase adolescent vulnerability to mental health conditions.⁵⁸

However, while the evidence as to whether screen time is causing the current youth mental health crisis is mixed, this does not mean we can become complacent.

A lack of an unequivocal and strong correlation between screen time, social media use and mental ill-health at an aggregate level, does not mean that we shouldn't work to understand and manage the problems that do exist online.

Social media platforms are not benign, and there are clear examples of the risks associated with use and the harms that they can and have caused. Young people shouldn't be exposed to violence, bullying, or sexual exploitation online regardless of whether this does or does not increase their risk of a mental health condition.

Given this, young people and their families need to be supported to manage their safety online, however, they should not be expected to take responsibility for aspects of social media platforms that are harmful (for example, addictive design, elevation of hate speech). Tech companies need to work collaboratively with young people and mental health experts and make data available to researchers to investigate the impacts of social media use on young people's mental health and co-design features that promote wellbeing and decrease the risk of psychological injury and harm online.

Sadly, it appears that social media companies are unlikely to change certain design elements unless they are regulated. While there are emerging examples of where this is being done (e.g., the EU), more is required. That said, advocates for change need to avoid alarmist headlines and mixed messages. Young people want messaging that is not fear-based or judgemental.

“When creating policies, you need to work with young people to see whether they actually agree with it and whether it would work for them.”

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Ultimately, young people want to continue to be able to access social media, but they want these platforms to be safe. They also want information, education, and resources that are co-designed by young people and respect their ability to make informed decisions. Young people need to be involved in generating the solutions to the problems on social media, since several sources of data show a generational divide in the way that young people and older generations think about the online world. Given this, we recommend that:

- 1 Government and service providers adopt a public-health informed approach that aims to increase young people’s exposure to protective factors for their mental health and decrease their exposure to risk factors both in online and offline environments.

- 2 Government continues to support the Australian eSafety Commissioner, not-for-profit organisations and others, to educate and empower young people to use social media channels safely and respectfully through education initiatives in schools, TAFEs, universities and other settings. Young people need to be involved in the co-design of all programs. Initiatives must be regularly evaluated by young people to ensure they meet their needs in a rapidly changing digital environment.

- 3 Government should provide funding to upskill professionals who work with young people to give them the skills to confidently assist young people experiencing challenges online. It is particularly important that mental health professionals work according to clear, evidence-based guidelines. Youth co-design of guidelines is important to ensure that help and support reflects what young people need in the real world.

- 4 Mental health organisations should include information about the benefits and risks associated with screen time and social media use on their own websites and social media channels and ensure that they provide or link young people to appropriate educational content, tools and resources on these issues. They should also ensure their own channels are safe. Co-design with young people and mental health organisations is important to ensure that content is evidence-based, relevant and meaningful.

- 5 Governments must work to improve the regulation of social media companies and require them to do more to investigate, understand and manage any risks and harms associated with their products, even if these harms are only experienced by segments of the community. Young people should be involved in these discussions and the development of appropriate responses.

- 6 Social media companies must work harder to actively prevent young people’s exposure to harassment, discrimination, racism, cyberbullying, financial and sexual exploitation, and other serious risks on their platforms. This responsibility should not be pushed back onto young people.

- 7 Social media companies should provide young people with the ability to regulate the content they see and prohibit the viewing of certain material, ensure they include trigger and content warnings on certain content, and provide the public with greater transparency on the way that algorithms work to promote (or shadow ban) certain content. Social media companies should also produce stronger reporting guidelines.

- 8 Government should continue to focus on understanding and addressing the other risk factors that are harming young people’s mental health, in addition to making social media platforms safer for young people.

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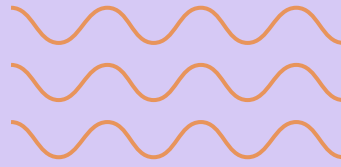
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