Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

by ReachOut's Youth Advocates

August 2024

About ReachOut

At ReachOut we are guided by a clear, simple ambition: Helping young people feel better.

Helping them to feel:

- better in the moments when they most need help
- better about who they are and their place in the world.

And to be:

- better able to cope with the challenges they are facing today
- better set up and equipped to manage when life doesn't go as planned.

Anonymous and confidential, ReachOut is a safe place where young people can openly express themselves, get a deeper understanding and perspective on what's happening in their lives, connect with people who will provide judgement-free support, and build the resilience to manage their challenges now and in the future.

One hundred per cent online and designed specifically for – and with – young people, ReachOut lets young people connect on their terms at any time from anywhere. From one-to-one support from experienced peer workers, to online communities, as well as tips, stories and resources, ReachOut offers a wide range of support options that allow young people to engage in the ways they want to, when they want to.

ReachOut Parents and ReachOut Schools provide valuable information, resources and advice to help parents, carers and educators better understand the young people in their lives and to play an active role in their wellbeing.

About ReachOut's Youth Advocates

ReachOut's Youth Advocacy Program is an exciting initiative that works to ensure young people's views are represented in the government policy and decision making processes that impact their mental health and wellbeing.

The program was co-designed with young people and sector experts to ensure it meets young people's needs and facilitates productive engagement with governments.

ReachOut Youth Ambassadors apply to take part in the program via an application and selection process.

The program includes practical advocacy work, ongoing training and skill development opportunities.

The advocates who have worked on this submission are:
- April, 21 from NSW
- Carly, 18 from Darug Land, NSW (Greenway Electorate)
- Chase, 24 from Wadawurrung Nation, VIC (Corio Electorate)
- Georgia, 22 from Naarm, VIC
- Will, 21 from Wurundjeri Country, VIC (Kooyong Electorate)
- Layla, from NSW
- Sina, 23 from NSW

Content warning

The following document includes references to mental ill-health, including eating disorders. The document has been prepared with reference to Mindframe's guidelines. ReachOut encourages anyone in distress to seek support.

Executive summary

Across Australia, young people like us are digital natives who spend a lot of time in their online worlds everyday. In fact, 93 per cent of young people in Australia use social media daily, for 2-3 hours on average, across platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram *(*Kemp, 2024*)*.

As young people, we think that social media offers a range of benefits (like information and connection). However, it also comes with risks (like safety, misinformation and addiction) to the lives and mental health of the thousands of young people in Australia who use these platforms everyday.

This year, the media (including our social feeds!) has been flooded with debates about whether young people in Australia should be restricted from accessing social media until they are 16. And politicians around the country have voiced support for the move.

Young people don't want or need a ban. But we *do* want and need effective reforms. The following submission will explore our recommendations for how social media can become a safer space for young people. We think that no single measure can solve all the issues associated with social media for young people. And, we suggest that restricting access to social media by age presents a range of practical and ethical challenges that could have unintended consequences for young people.

We also think that young people's voices have been missing so far from a lot of the debate about social media policy. We want to change that. We bring our lived and living experiences of social media, mental health and life challenges to this paper. This makes it particularly important.

Our paper has also been informed by the work of researchers, experts and organisations such as ReachOut, Black Dog Institute, Beyond Blue, Prevention United and the eSafety Commissioner.

Recommendations: Overview

Recommendation 1: That regulation of, policies for and changes to social media platforms for young people be co-designed with young people.

Recommendation 2: That young people have greater control over the algorithms that control the content they see on social media.

Recommendation 3: That governments and social media companies make further investment into education for young people about social media and online safety.

Recommendation 4: That mental health information on social media be verified to help support young people's mental health and wellbeing when using social media.

Recommendation 5: That actions taken to support young people's wellbeing and mental health on social media be guided by mental health experts including ReachOut and the eSafety Commissioner.

The unacceptable harms and risks of social media

We brainstormed some of the negative things we have experienced on social media platforms. They included:
- trolling and bullying
- misinformation
- scams
- the impacts of the addictiveness of the platforms
- exposure to harmful content
- impacts on body image

We understand that this list reflects research being done in this area, including that by Prevention United.

We believe that these experiences are unacceptable and that more needs to be done to keep young people safe on social media.

It is undisputed that regulation of, policies for and changes to social media platforms are required to support young people.

However, we need to understand the full picture of social media use for young people, not just the negative aspects.

Does social media = mental ill-health?

There has been a spike in poor mental health outcomes for young people in Australia since the 1990s (Prevention United, 2024). This timing aligns with the rise of smartphones and social media. It also aligns with the emergence of the climate crisis, deteriorating housing affordability and, in our view, a more uncertain future for young people.

However, despite the claims linking social media and mental health, there is a lack of good-quality studies on the mental health effects of social media use overall, with mixed results being reported (Prevention United, 2024). Prevention United (2024) concludes that proving causation between mental health outcomes and social media is complicated.

Professor Jo Robinson, the Head of Suicide Prevention at Orgyen, stated: '*We know that there can be risks for young people associated with using social media. However, it's important to balance these risks with the potential benefits – such as fostering a sense of community, facilitating help-seeking and providing a platform for grief expression.*' (Orygen, 2024).

Some benefits of social media

If social media isn't always bad for our mental health, then what are its benefits? Research by Prevention United (2024) highlights a range of benefits of social media use by young people, including:

- improved social connectedness
- reduced loneliness
- increased self-determination
- increased education and independence
- enhanced feelings of control in their lives, and
- increased emotional support.

These 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*' (Prevention United, 2024).

And research by ReachOut (2024) also showed that young people use social media to:

- search for mental health information
- substitute for professional support
- find support from people with similar experiences

As a group, we also brainstormed some of the positive things we have experienced on social media including:

- It helps us to connect with other people.
- It helps us to find like-minded community spaces where we feel free to be ourselves.
- It gives us a place to experiment with who we are and to develop our own identity.
- It provides a place for us to have healthy discussions around ideas.
- It helps us to connect with support services when we need them

Exactly how do young people use social media to support their mental health?

With the understanding that social media can have benefits for young people's mental health, it's important to explore what this looks like in practical terms.

ReachOut's research brief *Social media and mental health: What young people Want* (2024) includes data from a multiphase, mixed-methods study in which qualitative data from 22 young people informed the design of a national survey of 2056 young people aged 16–25 (conducted in November 2023).

The report (ReachOut, 2024) explores specifically how young people across the country are using social media to support their mental health. It outlines that young people across Australia are digital natives who spend a lot of time in their online worlds. Because of this, young people are increasingly turning to digital platforms, including social media, for mental health information and support.

ReachOut's research (2024) indicates that social media can be a source of support for young people when it comes to their mental health. Also, in some cases, social media is being used by young people who don't have access to or don't want professional mental health support. The findings included:

- 73% of young people regularly use social media to search for mental health information, or have done so in the past.
- 35% of young people with a probable serious mental illness search for mental health information on social media once a week or more.
- More than 50% of young people facing mental health challenges use social media as a substitute for professional support.
- 65% of participants agreed, or strongly agreed, that they use social media for '*connection with other people who have experienced the same thing as me*'

According to ReachOut's research (2024), the most popular platforms for young people when it comes to searching for mental health information (other than Google) are TikTok, YouTube and Instagram.

And when young people search for mental health information online, they want practical advice, information that makes them feel like they are going to be okay and information about specific mental health conditions.

The case against a ban

With these benefits in mind we think it's important to consider how a social media ban could impact the mental health of young people across Australia.

According to the eSafety Commissioner (2024) banning young people from social media could be ineffective and have unintended consequences. For example:

- A ban may encourage some children and young people to access social media without the support of their parents and carers, leaving them more vulnerable to harm.
- As the relevant age verification technology is not advanced, some young people may be banned from social media despite being of an eligible age.
- It is difficult to separate social media from other forms of online content, which means that young people might be able to access social media from other places even if a ban is in place.
- Young people won't be able to access mental health support via social media.

Other experts have also commented that young people can encounter issues on social media whatever their age, and that the focus should be on making social media safe for all young people (ABC, 2024).

We also think that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2021) is an important consideration, in that young people should be able to engage in things like advocacy.

'*The rights of every child must be respected, protected and fulfilled in the digital environment. Innovations in digital technologies affect children's lives and their rights in ways that are wide-ranging and interdependent, even where children do not themselves access the Internet. Meaningful access to digital technologies can support children to realize the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights. However, if digital inclusion is not achieved, existing inequalities are likely to increase, and new ones may arise.*' (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2021).

We also want to highlight, in particular, that a ban could have a significant impact on young people from diverse backgrounds and those who live in places where they might not be able to access adequate levels of mental health support (Prevention United, 2024).

Experts from the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University stated: '*No single measure will protect children from abuse and exploitation in the online and offline world – multi-sectoral, interrelated interventions are required to prevent and respond to online harms. Amongst these measures, it is important to raise awareness of children (and their parents) of the risks of online exploitation and abuse and equip them with the knowledge, skills (both digital literacy and social, emotional and behavioural) and tools to protect themselves and to seek help and*

report abuse when it happens.' (UNICEF and the Young and Resilient Research Centre, 2022).

What do young people's social media experiences actually look like?

Our submission has so far highlighted the evidence around both benefits and harms of social media use. In this section of the submission our youth advocates share their personal stories to illustrate what this can look like in real life for young people.

Personal story: Will (he/him), 21, from 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 to 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.

Personal story: Georgia (she/her), 22 from Melbourne

Content warning: This story mentions the topic of eating disorders, disordered eating and body image.

From a young age, I felt that I looked a bit different from my peers. Growing up and going through adolescence, I never really saw anyone of my body shape or with my features represented in the media.

I started using social media when I was about 13 - at the same time as the rise of the influencer culture that we see now and accept as normal. It felt like all I was shown on social media every day was unattainable beauty standards.

I grew up in the time when Tumblr and YouTube were really popular. Looking back now, I feel like they were very unregulated spaces where young people could access content about whatever they liked.

For example, I was exposed to Tumblr pages that were specifically designed to promote disordered eating, including images and tips. And on YouTube, there were so many videos filled with information about diet culture.

At the time, I don't think a lot of content creators were thinking about the impacts their messages were having on their audiences when it came to body image and mental health. I also noticed a lot of young people on my feeds emulating influencers and posting content that was aligned with unrealistic beauty standards.

Access to this kind of content was a slippery slope for me. During this, time self-esteem issues and a hatred of my appearance grew for me. I think that social media contributed in a real way to a very long-term battle I had with my own body.

Eventually, I was diagnosed with an eating disorder. For me, this included symptoms of being hyper fixated on, and scared of, food and the world around me.

Recovery has been, and still is, a very long process. In my recovery journey I have learnt the things we should be teaching young people. That your shape, weight and features can be hereditary or due to health issues. That you could eat the exact same food and exercise the same way and still not look like that influencer you look up to. Most importantly, that your appearance doesn't define you and has absolutely nothing to do with your worth.

Today, I am still on my recovery journey. Sadly, I think that social media actively plays a negative role in my recovery at times and often significantly sets me back.

It has been particularly difficult for me recently watching this same kind of content come back years later on TikTok. For me, it's a reminder of how powerful and dangerous the algorithms can be - in particular, for young people who may be experiencing so many changes when it comes to their bodies.

According to research by the Butterfly Foundation eight out of ten young people agree that social media platforms need to do more to help young people have a positive body image (2023). I think this is so important, with rates of eating disorders on the rise for young people in Australia.

I am sharing my story in support of other young people who may have been through something similar to me, for those who might be going through a tough time at the moment, and to help prevent other young people from ever having these experiences in the first place.

I am calling on social media companies to provide greater control over algorithms as just one thing they can do to support young people. I think that, as a young person if I had been given more control over what I was seeing on social media, I may not have spent so much time consuming content that was having such a negative impact on my mental health. I think there was also an opportunity for social media companies to serve me support content and body positivity content that may have assisted me in seeking support earlier.

Recommendations

This submission has so far established the following:
- Young people across Australia are exposed to unacceptable risks and harm when they use social media, including to their mental health. Change is needed.
- Social media can have positive impacts on the mental health of young people. It is important to consider all the impacts of social media on young people's mental health when proposing regulation, policy and platform changes.
- Solutions that sound simple, like a social media ban won't fix all of the problems associated with social media and could have unintended consequences.

Our recommendations detail what we think will work to improve young people's experiences on social media. They are based on research and our lived and living experiences.

ReachOut's Youth Advocates are calling for:

Recommendation 1: That regulation of, policies for and changes to social media platforms for young people be co-designed with young people.

Young people are experts when it comes to their mental health and wellbeing. They are also digital natives, with in-depth knowledge of the social media platforms they use every day. This means that young people are well placed to advise governments, social media companies and other groups on what needs to be done and how to go about it.

Recommendation 2: That young people have greater control over the algorithms that control the content they see on social media.

In ReachOut's research with thousands of young people across Australia (2024) study participants said they wanted greater user control over algorithms.

The current intrinsic design of social media algorithms can be particularly problematic for young people due to their developmental stage (ReachOut, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute, 2024).

'*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.*' (ReachOut, Beyond Blue and Black Dog Institute, 2024)

Recommendation 3: That governments and social media companies make further investments in education for young people about social media and online safety.

This is important in order to support young people to understand both the advantages and limitations of online spaces and to help keep them safe online.

We agree with Prevention United (2024) that digital literacy education needs to be regularly updated and be in line with advancements in technology. This recommendation is also inline with the eSafety's (2024) recommendation that a prevention based approach be taken to online safety for young people.

Without education about online safety, young people's mental health may still be negatively impacted by social media, whatever their age. We think it's important to consider what learning about online platforms actually looks like in reality too.

Education about online safety in school is critical - but if social media is banned, how will we learn how to use it safely?

We also think that this learning should be co-designed with young people. For example, it could include lived experience stories from older young people who have used these platforms, and/or it could be delivered via technology so that it is more interactive and impactful for students.

Recommendation 4: That mental health information on social media be verified to help support young people's mental health and wellbeing when using social media.

In ReachOut's research brief *Social media and mental health: What young people want* (2024), young people called for better mental health content, including being able to more easily identify credible sources of mental health information.

We think this is important, because right now there is so much information about mental health on social media that it's hard to tell which of it is credible and which isn't.

We think it should be easier to identify information that comes from sources such as registered mental health organisations and trained professionals.

We call on social media companies to co-design with young people a solution to this problem . We think that technology experts collaborating with young people is the best way to devise real solutions that young people will use to identify credible mental health information.

Recommendation 5: That actions taken to support young people's wellbeing and mental health on social media be guided by mental health experts including ReachOut and the eSafety Commissioner.

Throughout this submission, we have layered our lived experience with research and expert opinion. We think this is a really important combination.

We have chosen to advocate for ReachOut because it's an organisation that values the expertise of young people, partners with us to share our lived experiences, and collaborates with young people to co-design mental health support.

Social media companies and the government are in powerful positions and have the resources to make meaningful and positive change to help young people thrive in their development.

ReachOut supports young people when it comes to social media

There is a lot of work being done by mental health organisations now to connect with and support young people on social media, including by ReachOut.

The support ReachOut provides via social media includes content that allows young people to learn more about what's happening for them on social media, as well as practical tips and pathways to support. Young people can also raise any issues about social media via ReachOut's Online Community and ReachOut PeerChat.

As discussed in this submission, social media is a place where young people often go for mental health support. ReachOut plays an important role in providing credible and relatable support in this space for young people.

ReachOut uses Instagram and TikTok, along with other platforms such as YouTube and SnapChat, to reach young people with mental health support via social media.

ReachOut provides a mix of formats (videos, graphics, images) designed to validate young people's experiences, educate and inform mental health literacy, and inspire a sense of agency in young people to take the next step to get support.

The team works with relevant creators and Youth Ambassadors to share lived experience stories and utilises experts to provide factual information.

In addition, ReachOut provides support for parents and carers who support the young people in their lives. This includes content they can access online to learn more about the issues their young person might be facing when it comes to social media, as well as services like Parents Coaching.

And, ReachOut is undertaking important research about young people, social media and their mental health, as referenced in this submission. The importance of this growing body of evidence should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Social media is an integral part of our lives as young people in the 21st century. There's no denying that this exposes us to a world of unknowns and risks, yet the proven benefits and advantages of social media are too often overlooked or ignored during the debate on social media use.

Due to different generations perceiving social media in different lights, it's crucial that we are including young people in this appraisal. Despite popular belief, previous studies haven't found conclusive evidence linking poor mental health to social media use.

In order to determine the actions necessary to improve the safety and wellbeing of social media users, we need to understand the various ways young people use technology, as well as how technology use differs between different demographics. One striking example is how those from marginalised communities, such as young people living in regional or rural areas, are more likely to report benefits from being online, such as increased social connectedness.

Two concerns around banning young people from social media are, first, the risk of isolation it poses for them and, second, and the difficulties of enforcing such a ban. The likely result of a ban would be young people continuing to access the internet

and social media, yet doing so in private without guidance or support from parents and carers.

Some suggestions for reducing harm from social media include imposing more control over algorithms and improved education for young people that focuses on staying safe online. Social media is a crucial tool young people use to access mental health support; however, more measures are needed to validate mental health resources online were recommended to reduce the spread of misinformation.

A large percentage of the population consistently engages with social media platforms and, recommendations therefore need to align with this current trend. Technology and social media platforms will continue to evolve and expand over our lifetimes. Taking action now and setting clear expectations for how companies design their products is pivotal in starting to reduce the harms that social media can pose. And young people need to have a voice in this discussion in order to better understand the needs and support we require for ourselves and for future generations.

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