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How does social media affect teens? A deep dive

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The global headlines tell the story. As 2025 rolls into 2026, the world is closely watching Australia as our government rolls out a unique (and, clearly, conversation-starting) [social media ban for under-16s](#).

Amongst the endless global commentary, though, questions remain: how does social media actually affect teens? And will the social media ban do anything to benefit Australian teens? To assist us in getting to the bottom of this hot-button topic, we've sent a friend request to Deakin University LLB Honours student Coby Lamont.

What is the impact of social media on teen mental health?

Social media is believed to have started with long-defunct website [SixDegrees.com way back in 1997](#). Since then, social media has grown exponentially in use, diversity, and cultural impact, with a landscape

now dominated by sites like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. Despite the ubiquity of social media, though, Lamont says that we still don't fully understand its impact on teen mental health.

'The evidence is real, but messy,' he says. 'Harms exist, but a lot of the research is correlational, and effects vary significantly by child, platform, and pattern of use.'

The biggest mental health concern (and the most correlational, according to Lamont) is how these sites are typically designed.

'Design features that aim to maximise time spent on the platform are usually successful: e.g. Algorithmic feeds, endless scroll and social reward loops such as likes and notifications,' says Lamont. 'Heavy use is repeatedly linked with worse outcomes for some adolescents, especially around anxiety, depression and body image.'

It's not all doom and gloom though

– social media can reportedly affect teen mental health in a positive way, too.

'Social media can provide a social lifeline and peer support to children who are isolated, disabled or part of niche communities,' Lamont says. 'For example, a [15-year old paraplegic with Hodgkin's lymphoma](#) described social media as a 'lifeline' which he feels the government has disconnected.'

Why is Australia banning social media for under 16s?

When the [Online Safety Act 2021](#) changed on December 10, 2025, Australians under the age of 16 lost access to a host of social media sites.

The Australian government hopes its social media ban will prevent under-16s from holding accounts on apps including Facebook, Instagram, Kik, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube.

So, why have Australia's under-16s been banned from social media in the first place?

According to the government, the ban is meant to counter the negative effects of social media on teens.

'Minister Rowland [described the ban](#) as the "right thing to do for the right reasons at the right time,"' says Lamont. 'It was implemented to reduce young people's exposure to online harms such as grooming, image-based abuse, and harmful content, and to answer strong public pressure for tougher action.'

The teen ban is designed to tackle the effects of social media beyond mental health and related online harms, too — especially exposure to hateful and extreme materials.

'From July 2023 to May 2024, the eSafety commissioner received 12,525 complaints about illegal and restricted content,' Lamont says. '82% of these reports related to child sexual exploitation and abuse material. The negative effects are real, and children are paying the price.'

It's worth noting that the 'ban' only affects teens creating accounts with certain social media sites. It doesn't prevent access – it only restricts users

from creating or holding accounts. Websites like YouTube and Reddit are still accessible without user accounts (albeit with some limitations).

How will Australia enforce the social media ban?

Minister Rowland and the Australian government have high hopes for the effects of the teen social media ban – but how do they plan to enforce it?

The key, says Lamont, comes down to age verification.

‘Australia has taken an interesting approach by placing the onus on the platforms to enforce the ban,’ Lamont says. ‘Specifically, the social media platform must take “reasonable steps to prevent age-restricted users having accounts”. The eSafety commissioner can issue very large fines for failing to do so. That makes age verification the critical compliance tool.’

Age verification goes beyond government IDs, instead often relying on facial recognition – a technology that Lamont says is still in its infancy.

‘Its success in government trials has reportedly been 85% accurate in picking a user’s age within an 18-month range,’ he says. ‘However, studies have shown significant racial and gender bias in AI face estimation. Early rollouts of face-verification in the UK have resulted in users employing video game avatars to bypass age-checks.’

Should social media be banned for under 18s?

Australia has settled on 16 as the cut-off for its social media ban, but that seems to be a compromise. ‘Government explanation has leaned on parental consensus, most parents favoured a minimum age between 14 and 16, though some supported 18,’ Lamont says.

For some observers like Lamont, though, that parental consensus is not enough to justify the effects of the teen social media ban.

‘It is my opinion that the government has not provided sufficient justification for this choice,’ he says. ‘Studies cited by the government themselves have shown a “window of sensitivity” to social media between the ages of 11 to 19.’

So, does this mean the age range for the social media ban should extend to all under 18s, for instance? According to [news reports](#), European countries considering their own social media bans are actually trending in the other direction, with younger cut-off ages like 15 more likely. Only time will tell whether Australia makes any changes to its own legislation.

How does social media affect teens in a post-ban Australia?

Australia’s social media ban has arrived with the best intentions – at least, according to the government. But, while protecting young Australians is hardly a controversial goal, it remains to be seen how well the ban will work in practice. As Lamont explains, the effects of the social media ban could be muted by teens finding workarounds.

‘Whilst the ban is still relatively new, news reports are plentiful with examples of teens using VPNs, fake IDs, parent accounts or switching to less-regulated apps,’ Lamont says. ‘This is predictable in any high-demand environment. Displacement risk is high when less regulated platforms attempt to fill the gap

in the market a ban has left. It is likely the aforementioned harms will continue, just less visible, less regulated, and with a degree of shame attached.'

At this early stage, it's hard to say with any certainty how the social media ban will affect teens in Australia. According to Lamont, the nature of the ban is likely to keep evolving.

'The government will either respond by adding more social media platforms to the list, or attempting more focused, less arbitrary, regulation around the design of these platforms.'