headspace National responses to questions on notice from the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian society

Do you think that Social Media Companies owe their users, participants, partners, and content creators a duty of care?

Social media companies have a responsibility to do more to ensure their platforms are safe for young people. While young people using social media are at risk of a range of harms, many experience benefits from social media, including making connections, having their voice heard, and learning about mental health resources and supports. Social media companies have a responsibility to ensure young people are safe while accessing their platforms.

We talk a lot about effective regulation – we want to get this right, but we also don't want to let perfect be the enemy of the good. The focus then is on measuring the effectiveness of interventions.

How do you propose that the government measure the effectiveness of interventions aimed at minimising the risks of social media? Specifically, what metrics or indicators should be used to assess whether the regulation is having the intended impact?

As noted in our submission, problematic social media use can lead to risk of a number of harms, including procrastination, social comparison, exposure to disinformation, and decreased physical activity.

The specific metrics or indicators may depend on the regulatory approach adopted. Contemporary research from our colleagues at Orygen, Black Dog Institute and other Australian youth mental health organisations will provide useful guidance on ways to measure and monitor changes in risks and harms.

Your research indicates that 33% of young people were considered to have problematic social media use. You suggest introducing regulations requiring social media platforms to include features that help young people manage their usage.

How do you define problematic social media use?

headspace's 2022 National Youth Mental Health Survey found 33% of surveyed young people experienced problematic social media use. The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (a self-report questionnaire designed to measure dependence on social media across six indicators) was used to identify this rate of problematic use.

We value youth voice and believe young people have a good understanding and insight into the pros and cons of social media.

What specific design features should be mandated?

As noted in our submission, there are a range of options for social media companies to enable and promote, including: simple controls for young people to stop 'infinite' scroll settings; to show content in a chronological order that identifies when they have seen all new content; and to limit content feeds to accounts they are following.

For more advice on specific design features, headspace invites the Committee to consider the work of researchers at Orygen and other youth mental health and social media researchers.

What strategies should the government adopt to identify and support those at risk of developing mental health issues related to their social media use?

As described in our submission, both young people and families have identified the need for more comprehensive online safety education and further support to manage online safety. This can include: practical skills for young people to navigate harmful content and algorithm design; tools and resources for parents to use to feel well equipped to support young people in matters of online safety; and for schools and community organisations to better support young people in navigating life online.

Do you believe age verification should be a part of these regulations to prevent younger users from accessing harmful content, or from developing an addiction at a young age?

Using age verification as a mechanism to ban young people from accessing social media is a blunt instrument that is likely to have unintended consequences. While it may minimise the harms for some users, it is likely to have a negative impact on many vulnerable young people who experience a range of benefits from social media use.

We have heard from a number of witnesses about the impact of cyberbullying on children – and the way social media platforms have been used to facilitate cyberbullying. You recommended stronger laws to address this issue.

What specific legal measures do you believe would be effective and enforceable?

While there is a clear need for stronger regulation of social media platforms, including around improved reporting and accountability, headspace does not have the expertise to recommend specific legal measures.

We know that social media companies are using users' data to target advertising for the advertising customers and clients. Naturally, children under 18 years of age are then in position to be commercially exploited by big tech to boost the bottom line.

Do you think that there should be an outright ban on targeted advertising to children?

headspace does not have the capacity to assess the evidence for an outright ban. However, when government uses regulatory or policy levers that impact on profitability of private companies, the impact can be more immediate than when government uses other available policy levers.

Have you worked with the social media/tech companies to develop tools to direct people to resources/help/support? Such as pop ups directing to help or support? Similar to Butterfly work with Meta to develop pop ups when people search eating disorder content they will get redirected to support. If so, could you provide examples of this and any data measuring success or not.

In 2015, headspace National engaged with Facebook and beyond blue to develop a mental health and suicide prevention tool. The tool was designed to direct people who were flagged as at risk of harm towards a range of options, including starting a conversation with a friend about how they are feeling, some simple strategies to help them relax, and a tool that will help them find mental health professionals in their area.