

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Re PUBLIC HEARING

Monday 30 September 2024

Susan Templeman MP

Question on Notice

Answers from Ms Toni Hassan

Question:

A number of young people and their parents have raised with me the positive opportunities for social media where a young person has, for instance, neurodiversity or they identify as queer, are seeking support for a mental illness including eating disorders, have a particular interest or hobby, or live remotely or regionally, or are isolated in some way.

(i) What impact do you think an age ban on social media will have on young people who use it to connect with others in a positive way?

The ban will be challenging for existing users but good for them and those uninitiated in the long term.

Isolated people and those in vulnerable groups do benefit from positive connections found online. Inclusive queer spaces, for example, do exist. My son has benefited from them. But my son's experience on social media was more destructive than constructive.

It's more common that someone who is isolated or vulnerable is harmed by social media content than is supported by a platform. If they are supported it has come after enduring painful experiences.

Multiple data sources show that social media is *harming* teens in these minority groups the most, and that protections would likely *benefit* them most. Please also note [here](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/) in this article, that there are LGBTQ+ advocacy groups who are eager and desperate for accountability and regulation in the tech industry. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/>

Influential US psychologist Jean Marie Twenge argues the same, that their mental health is worse because of social media. Social media exploits an existing vulnerability in human psychology. There is a link between heavy use and depression and suicidal tendencies among LGBTQ+.

In my strong and experience-backed view, users have little choice to steer their experience because of the algorithms at play. It's not easy to find a supportive community, your tribe, without being exposed to a lot of damaging content delivered by manipulative algorithms. That is why I urge, in my submission to the inquiry, that the government require platforms to turn off the 'autoplay' function that uses algorithms to keep people hooked and online for longer.

Further, regulating social media platforms and delaying use by minors will do the most to help change and improve social norms around phone usage.

(ii) What would you suggest is put in place as an alternative for those particular young people?

These concerns and issues existed before social media. Social media has not fixed them. I would be asking a taskforce what works to help people (of all ages, sexes and genders, interests) who are struggling to belong, to belong. Bring that evidence to the table to resource the alternatives. Ask about the underlying causes of their social isolation and unmet needs, and seek to resource communities, schools and homes, to be more inclusive and aware of what children and young people need to be pro-social and interact meaningfully, in embodied ways that cultivate a love of local place and space.

I would also explore diversionary programs (engaging the arts and bringing those children and young people of similar identities and interests) and mentoring outdoor camps which have been shown to help young people 'lose themselves to gain themselves'.

This is complicated because it is about culture and a deep codependency around technology and online connections.

My teenage daughter suggests that social media can make her forget how to have an easy 'ebb and flow' conversation offline and that it can thin her confidence to be in the 'real world'. She adds that the people someone who is isolated or vulnerable connects with positively online should be able to be retained as connections and friends in other ways, by phone or Zoom without the push and pull factors of social media platform use. If those connections can't be maintained then they are shallow connections.

For those children and young people and others that don't identify as queer, there are other ways to communicate for supportive connections using a phone, namely as group texting and video chat without social media. They can develop social and emotional skills (healthy, protective skills) in a safer environment.