Outline

[**Under 16s should be banned from using social media services**]

Introduction

[**Introduction**]: The use of social media by under-16s remains highly divisive as online platforms continue to expand rapidly. With most social media platforms currently adopting an age requirement of 13+ (OpenView Education, 2025), this argument considers whether the minimum age should be raised to 16 and legally enforced. In this context, a "ban" refers to a blanket restriction across all social media services - defined as digital platforms that enable users to create, share, and interact with content within online communities (Wikipedia, 2025). A recent European Parliament study on social media's impact on child development (European Parliament, 2023) underscores the urgency of this debate, highlighting growing concerns over how early and prolonged exposure to online platforms may affect children's mental health, social development, and vulnerability to harmful content.

For

<**Exposure To Harmful Content**>:

   + [**Sexual Content**]: The EU kids online study (European Parliament, 2023) reported that 33% on average of children aged 9-16 had been exposed to sexual content/pornography, surpassing 61% for 15-16-year-olds. A further study (Andrie et al., 2021) found exposure to sexual content was more pronounced in males who 'displayed dysfunctional internet behaviour', suggesting that exposure to this content can lead to negative behavioural effects.

   + [**Grooming**]: Beyond exposure to sexual media, an evidence review (Stoilova, Livingstone, et al., 2021) found that up to 17% of minors surveyed had received "sexual solicitations" from adults online, highlighting the alarming threat to under 16s that is grooming.

+ [**Explicit and Hateful Content**]: The EU study reported widespread exposure to harmful content among under-16s, with over 10% encountering material on self-harm, drug use and pro-anorexic rhetoric. In some EU countries, up to 48% of children had received hateful messages, including pressure to self-harm, verbal abuse, and exclusion. (European Parliament, 2023). This online hate was often targeted towards sexuality, gender, religion, and other marginalized groups.

+ [**Advertisement Exploitation**]: Fairplay and Global Action Plan found that 82% of 16-17-year-olds have encountered over-targeted advertisements which make them feel uncomfortable, with Facebook's targeting system allowing exposure to ads for alcohol, gambling, and weight-loss products.

+ [**Ideological Manipulation**]: Research from UCL found TikTok's algorithm to "amplify misogynistic content to teens" and revealed that these hateful ideologies have migrated from social media into school environments, permeating "mainstream youth culture".

+ <**Ban Limits Harmful Content Exposure**>: I strongly believe that under 16's exposure to this harmful content should be minimised and ban from social media would contribute to this.

- <**Remove & Filter Harmful Content**>: Children's exposure to harmful content could be prevented through content removal and filtering systems. However, currently these systems are ineffective.

       -> [**Content Moderation Tools Are Inadequate**]

<**Poses Mental Health Risks**>:

+ [**Brain Development and Cognitive Function**]: Maza et al., 2023 studied 169 sixth and seventh graders and found that those who habitually checked social media showed altered brain development in areas linked to emotion, motivation, and cognitive control. Early exposure may physically reshape how under-16s respond to social rewards and punishments.

+ [**Increased Anxiety, Depression and Worsened Sleep**]: Research links adolescent social media use to increased mental distress and self-harm (Khalaf et al., 2023). Khalaf et al. also tie excessive phone use - especially before bed - to sleep loss, impaired cognition, and emotional dysregulation. Similarly, Pirdehgan et al. found strong links between social media, poor sleep (notably among boys), and depression.

+ [**Social Comparison**]: Based on my own and peers' childhood experiences, social media fosters harmful social comparison. Unrealistic portrayals, exacerbated by celebrities, pressured us to exaggerate our own lives, creating a toxic, competitive environment. This leads to low self-esteem, inadequacy, and lasting emotional impacts, particularly damaging during formative years.

+ <**Banning Social Media would improve Under 16s mental health**>: Social Media clearly impairs mental health, removing it would prevent this.

- <**Mental Health Problems are caused by external factors**>: These issues existed before social media and are often rooted in external causes. Addressing those may allow healthy use of social media.

       +> [**Provides A Safe Space**]
       +> <**Under 16s Can Navigate Social Media Healthily**>

<**Parents and Platforms struggle to protect Children**>:

+ [**Parents cannot manage**]: Parents cannot manage or regulate the social media use of their under 16-year-old children. A study published by Ofcom(Ofcom, 2023) investigated social media use for children aged 3 to 17, including their parents views and management methods changes as their children age. Firstly, for ages 3-4, 25% of parents believed their children were actively using WhatsApp, highlighting a clear lack of digital literacy and platform use awareness. Beyond the age of 3-4, parents transitioned from sitting beside their child during their online use to "regular checking" and asking what their children are doing. Alarmingly, through ages 12-15, 40% of parents opted to simply trust their child regarding online safety, for ages 16-17, this figure increased to 53%. Leaving under 16s entirely responsible for their online safety during such formative years is not just irresponsible, but potentially dangerous, and reflects a fundamental failure to protect children from digital harm.

+ [**Content Moderation Tools Are Inadequate**]: Current content filtering and moderation tools do not protect children on social media.

    + [**Failure to Remove Explicit Content**]: Research from Ofcom (Ofcom, 2024) shows that children are exposed to violent content as early as primary school. When asked, children describe encountering violent content online as "unavoidable" with teenage boys being more likely to actively share the violent content as a method to "fit in" with peers, highlighting their emotional immaturity.

    + [**Inappropriate Targeted Material**]: Research undertook by the 5Rights Foundation (5Rights Foundation) examined content shown to children on social media, examining how "design choices impact the lives of children". Interviewed designers explained how social media networks are built to "maximise reach and activity" and that there is "no ethics board in the digital space", meanwhile, child accounts were found to be targeted with "pro-suicide material" and pornography. Social media is not designed to keep children safe.

    + [**Facebook's New Policy (2025)**]: As of 2025, Facebook is altering its approach to content moderation ((Meta, 2025)).

        + [**(1)**]: Facebook is discontinuing partnerships with third-party fact-checking bodies, opting for a similar "community notes" system similarly used by X, where notes require broad agreement before being accepted. This delay could expose under 16s to higher levels of misinformation.

        + [**(2)**]: Facebook is relaxing content restrictions, specifically regarding political topics such as gender identity and immigration. Children may encounter more polarised or emotionally charged ideological narratives (i.e. transphobia) that they are not mature enough to navigate safely.

        + [**(3)**]: Facebook are focusing automated policy violation systems to target "high-severity" violations such as extremely explicit or illegal content. While this will reduce the most harmful content, less severe but still damaging content may become more visible to under 16s.

     +   **\<If under 16s can't be protected, they should not be able to use social media\>**

     -   **\<Why punish children? Why not fix the system?\>**

         +>   **\<There Are Difficulties Implementing A Social Media Ban\>**

Against

\<Can Provide Social Connection and Support\>:

     +   [**Enables Long Distance Interaction**]: Moving house or changing schools is common for many children. In my case, several close friends moved away during childhood, and without platforms like Instagram, I would have felt far more isolated. Social media helped me maintain those friendships despite the distance, supporting my mental health in a way that would have been much harder otherwise.

     +   [**Provides A Safe Space**]: Social Media can provide a safe space for under 16s, especially marginalised groups or children who may not have a healthy home environment. McAlister et al. found that social media can improve the mental health of adolescents by providing safe spaces for children, increasing vital social connection and reducing loneliness. Social Media was found to act as crucial support systems for adolescents in the LGBTQ+ community, offering validation and normalization in an anonymous space.

\<Under 16s Can Navigate Social Media Healthily\>:

     +   McAlister et al. also propose teaching emotional regulation to navigate social media healthily: (1) choose platforms wisely, (2) modify content exposure, (3) focus on positives, (4) reframe harmful feedback, and (5) manage emotional reactions through breaks or disengagement.

     -   **\<Children will not follow this in reality\>**

         -   **\<Educate children to adopt this mindset\>**: Teaching these skills early is better than delaying access, only for unhealthy habits to form later.

\<Provides Educational Resources\>:

     +   [**Learning Resources**]: Social media can provide valuable educational support alongside school learning, particularly for GCSEs. During my revision, I found free resources on platforms like YouTube as effective—if not more so—than traditional materials. The sheer volume of high-quality content benefits under-16s academically. Pires et al., 2021 found education was among the top five uses of YouTube by teens; banning access would clearly harm learning.

         +   [**Levels The Playing Field**]: Unfortunately, educational inequality persists. 2024 GCSE results show 48.8% of private school students earned Grade 7+, compared to just 19.4% in state schools (The Guardian, 2024). Removing access to free social media-based resources would disproportionately hurt state school students and widen the attainment gap. As someone from a state school who relied heavily on these tools, I find such a ban deeply unfair.

     -   [**Not all Social Media is Educational**]: Most platforms, like Instagram and Snapchat, prioritise entertainment and visual, short-form content.

However, features like TikTok's new "STEM" feed show efforts to promote learning (TikTok, 2024).

\<Another Pandemic Situation\>:

+ In the event of another global pandemic, under-16s would face heightened risks of isolation and disrupted education. COVID-19 research revealed that, across 200,000 individuals, loneliness had increased due to the social isolation (APA, 2022). In such circumstances, social media could play a vital role in supporting young people's mental health and providing access to educational resources.

   +> \<Can Provide Social Connection and Support\>
   +> \<Provides Educational Resources\>

\<There Are Difficulties Implementing A Social Media Ban\>:

+ [**Pre-existing Bans**]: Campbell et al. (Campbell et al., 2024) references multiple cases of mobile phone bans in schools across multiple countries and decades. Many of these restrictions were reversed due to them being overly rigid and difficult to enforce, as well as this, the ban shifted digital literacy education to families who felt unprepared to teach their children effectively.

+ [**Avoiding the Ban**]: Tools such as VPN can be used to bypass social media restrictions based on time and location. Clara Lin Hawking describes how children can avoid screen time limits and access both parentally and geographically blocked media by changing their virtual location. These technologies could lead to children continuing to use social media, potentially endangering themselves.

My Position

[**My Position**]: While I understand the appeal of banning under-16s from social media, especially to shield them from the disturbing and sometimes harrowing content I personally encountered as a child, I believe the issue is more complex. Social media can both harm and support young people's mental health, and a blanket ban risks depriving vulnerable groups of their crucial support systems. Instead, we should empower children to navigate these platforms healthily and regulate their emotions, as McAlister et al. recommend. Moreover, Pires et al. showed that social media is actively used by teens as a powerful educational tool; it is vital that these free resources remain available to everyone. Crucially, I believe much of the danger stems not from children's access itself but from widespread digital illiteracy among parents, which limits their ability to guide and protect their children online. If we prevent young people from developing these skills now, we risk raising yet another generation of digitally vulnerable adults. By teaching responsible use rather than enforcing prohibition, we create a safer, savvier future where children are better equipped to thrive in an increasingly digital world.

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