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BACKGROUND NOTE

Assessing and Addressing the Impact of Social Media on Children's Mental Health

Prepared by Elisabeth Staksrud – Professor, Media and Communication Department, University of Oslo

children@coe.int
www.coe.int/cdenf

This background note was drafted by Dr. Elisabeth Staksrud – Professor, Media and Communication Department, University of Oslo (independent consultant to the Council of Europe), under the supervision of the Secretariat of the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF). The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This background note is prepared in view of the Thematic dialogue on social media and children's mental health, to be held on 4th June 2026 and organised by the [Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child](#) (CDENF), in co-operation with the [Steering Committee for Human Rights in the fields of Biomedicine and Health](#) (CDBIO), under the auspices of the Presidency of Monaco of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers. It is intended to provide member states and other relevant stakeholders with a concise, evidence-informed basis for discussing policy developments concerning children's engagement with social media, including its broader implications for children's rights, well-being, mental health enabling their meaningful participation in digital environments.

The work is guided by a child-rights-based approach, in line with Council of Europe human rights standards, that seeks to strengthen understanding of both the opportunities and risks associated with children's use of social media, grounded in current evidence. It recognises that digital environments are an integral part of children's lives and aims to assess their implications for children's rights and well-being.

1.1 DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Although this note analyses the impact of social media on children's lives, its scope is necessarily shaped by the challenge of defining "social media" with precision. For the purposes of this analysis, "social media" is understood broadly as any internet intermediaries¹ and platforms² providing digital services that enable users to access information and create, share, and disseminate content to wider audiences while facilitating social interaction, communication, or networking.

This functional and rights-based understanding reflects existing Council of Europe approaches, including [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)2](#)³, which recognises social media platforms as internet intermediaries that support online sharing and participation. Furthermore, the analysis refers to the notion of "platforms" as defined in [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2026\)4](#)⁴, which most closely aligns with the concept of "social media" as used here.

Yet, classifying social media remains a significant public and regulatory challenge, as platforms and services increasingly blend social networking, messaging, entertainment, gaming, and commercial functions. In addition, services often referred to as "Social Media" in public debates, rarely identify themselves under a single, consistent category: YouTube primarily presents as a video-sharing and streaming service, TikTok as an entertainment platform driven by content discovery, Snapchat as a messaging service focused on private communication, and Instagram is photo and video sharing app. Such self-characterisation serves both branding

¹ "Internet intermediaries" are here understood as defined in Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2018\)2](#) on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries

² "platforms" are understood as defined in Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2026\)4](#) as those providers of online digital services whose primary purpose, function or use is to connect users and facilitate the exchange of information and ideas between them in publicly accessible forums, and that set the rules for their interactions, including through the frequent use of algorithmic systems to collect and analyse data or personalise their services. In the field of communications, such platforms include social networks, as well as search engines, news aggregators and video-sharing services insofar as these platforms provide user-to-user functionality.

³ [CM/Rec\(2018\)2](#)- Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries, Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 7 March 2018 at the 1309th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

⁴ [CM/Rec\(2026\)4](#) - Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on online safety and empowerment of users and content creators, Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 8 April 2026 at the 1556th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies

and regulatory purposes, and by avoiding the “social media” label, platforms can influence how they are perceived and whether they fall within the scope of current and emerging regulations.

To complicate the matter further, private messaging apps increasingly offer “social media like” functionalities, and some AI-based services resemble social media when they enable user interaction, content sharing, or community formation. And, importantly, social media functionalities may position children as organisers of peer spaces, for example when they create groups, invite members, moderate content or set interaction norms. While this does not make them responsible like commercial platforms, children’s own digital spaces can take on platform-like functions. Nevertheless, recognition of the risks of harm encountered by children should not be limited by the difficulty of defining the concept of social media.

1.2 WHY PROTECT CHILDREN ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS?

Children need protection on social media platforms because their rights, well-being, and development must be safeguarded across all environments in which they live, learn, communicate, and participate. Children’s rights also apply online.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)⁵, and General Comment 25 on children’s rights in the digital environment⁶, which apply to all Council of Europe Member states, States have a responsibility to ensure that children’s best interests, evolving capacities, health, development, privacy, access to information, protection from harm, and right to be heard are respected also in digital spaces. A rights-based approach must balance the three interconnected dimensions of children’s rights:

- **Provision:** Ensuring access to beneficial information, support, education, and opportunities;
- **Participation:** Enabling children to express themselves, connect, create, and engage in civic and social life;
- **Protection:** Safeguarding children from exploitation, abuse, discrimination, manipulation, harmful design, and other risks of harm.

The need to protect children on social media therefore does not arise from the belief that digital participation is inherently harmful, but from the obligation to ensure that digital environments are safe, inclusive, age-appropriate, and supportive of children’s well-being and agency. Here the **principle of evolving capacities** is essential: as children grow, they progressively acquire competencies that should be respected in the exercise of their rights, online and offline.

1.3 CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH AND THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

WHO (2025) defines **mental health** as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and contribute to their community. Mental health is an important contextual concern in discussions of children’s social media use. Children’s and adolescents’ mental health is shaped by multiple interacting factors, including family and peer relationships, school pressure, socio-economic insecurity, bullying, discrimination, climate anxiety, conflict and wars, the COVID-19 pandemic and the

⁵ Convention on the Rights of the Child United Nations. (1989). *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 ed.) <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

⁶ General Comment 25 on children’s rights in the digital environment Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2021). *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment*. United Nations. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3906061>

wider digital environment. [WHO \(2025\) reports](#) that one in seven 10–19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder, with depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders among the leading causes of illness and disability in adolescence. Suicide is reported to be the third leading cause of death among people aged 15–29. WHO observes how risk factors for suicide are multifaceted (including harmful use of alcohol, abuse in childhood, stigma against help-seeking, barriers to accessing care and access to means of suicide), explicitly noting how “Digital media, like any other media, can play a significant role in either enhancing or weakening suicide prevention efforts”. [UNICEF](#) (2021) has likewise warned of a global child and adolescent mental health crisis, with more than 13% of adolescents estimated to live with a mental disorder. Furthermore, a recent [OECD report](#) (2026) put forward that young people’s mental health has worsened across many countries. Cumulative exposure is highlighted as a key characteristic of the current youth mental health landscape, with rising depression, anxiety, psychological distress and poor well-being. The OECD identifies digitalisation and social media as among several possible contributing drivers, alongside wider pressures such as inequality, academic stress, bullying, climate anxiety and socio-economic insecurity.

This suggests that the relationship between social media and mental health should not be framed as a single-cause explanation, but as part of a broader rights and public health context, especially given continuing difficulties in accessing timely and appropriate mental healthcare.

2 SOCIAL MEDIA, CHILDREN, AND REGULATION

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA ORIGINS: EARLY PLATFORMS AND REGULATION

Social media has existed for 30 years, evolving from early online forums, regional networks, chatrooms, and platforms like LunarStorm, Six Degrees, and Myspace, into a globally dominant ecosystem primarily controlled by major American companies. While the fundamental functions of social media—user-generated content, sharing, and interaction—have remained consistent, the technological landscape has undergone dramatic changes. The rise of smartphones, algorithmic feeds, attention-driven business models, persuasive design, and targeted advertising have raised new societal concerns, particularly about social media’s potential effects on children and their mental health.

In the same period, for almost three decades, European institutions have been engaged with these questions. The Council of Europe developed early frameworks focused on [children’s rights in digital environments](#), privacy, online safety, and media literacy, emphasising both protection and participation.⁷ Similarly, early EU initiatives such as the Safer Internet Action Plan (1999–2004) and later the Safer Internet Plus Programme recognised online opportunities alongside emerging risks for minors (O’Neill et al., 2013; Staksrud, 2016). These instruments largely centred on harmful content, cyberbullying, privacy, and access focusing on industry responsibility through self-regulation. Regulatory initiatives have evolved around the understanding that children need to be protected, supported, and empowered in digital environments. This has included measures aimed at strengthening children’s and parents’

⁷ See in particular binding frameworks such as: The [European Convention on Human Rights](#), [The Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse \(Lanzarote Convention\)](#), [Council of Europe’s Data Protection Convention \(“Convention 108”\)](#); [Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime \(Budapest Convention\)](#) and non-binding frameworks: Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2016\)2](#) to member states on the Internet of citizens; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2014\)6](#) on a Guide to human rights for Internet users; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2012\)4](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the protection of human rights with regard to social networking services.

digital literacy, promoting user empowerment, supporting access to reliable information, education and democratic engagement, increasing industry oversight and accountability, developing reporting mechanisms and hotlines, and improving the evidence base through research, monitoring, and knowledge-sharing.

2.2 THE EVOLVING REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Today's growing debates focus largely on whether social media contributes to or causes decreased well-being for children. This is often exemplified by referring to concerns that social media can trigger, amplify and/or sustain increased anxiety, depression, body image issues, self-harm exposure, reduced attention spans, and broader developmental harms among children and young people.

Others point to important benefits linked to social connection, peer support, creativity, identity development, access to information, learning, civic participation, and opportunities for children in general, and marginalised children in particular, to express themselves and take part in communities and democracies that may not be available to them offline.

Newer European frameworks, including the recent [Recommendation on online safety and empowerment of users and content creators](#)⁸, as well as the EU [General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#), the revised [Audiovisual Media Services Directive \(AVMSD\)](#), and the [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#), reflect a broader shift from earlier content-focused child safety measures toward systemic platform governance, risk mitigation, and platform accountability based increasingly on service reach, function, and societal impact. The shift has been prompted by how social media and other digital platforms increasingly rely on algorithmic curation, engagement optimisation, and “addictive by design” architectures that shape what users see, how long they stay, and how they behave online.

2.3 PUBLIC DEBATES AND NATIONAL REGULATORY INITIATIVES

Parental concerns have become a major force in newer debates on children's social media use. Many parents report heightened anxiety driven by intensified parenting norms, rapid technological change, algorithmically curated content, and a perceived loss of control over children's increasingly private digital lives. While some parents call for stronger regulation, surveillance, age restrictions and social media bans, others prioritise balanced or alternative approaches to preserve children's autonomy, participation, and digital opportunities. Scholars have argued that the stricter regulation of children's social media use reflects not only justified concerns and technological anxieties, but also deeper normative debates about childhood, parental responsibility, public health, and the role of the state (see for instance Archer, 2025; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Marwick, 2008; Staksrud & Kirksæther, 2013; Staksrud & Ólafsson, 2020).

⁸ See in particular: Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2026\)4](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on online safety and empowerment of users and content creators; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2026\)2](#) Technology facilitated violence against women and girls; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2022\)13](#) on the impacts of digital technologies on freedom of expression; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2020\)1](#) on the human rights impacts of algorithmic systems; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2019\)10](#) on developing and promoting digital citizenship education; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2018\)2](#) on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries; Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2018\)7](#) on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment.

Recently, public concerns have prompted many **national governments** to propose or test stronger interventions, including age assurance systems, platform restrictions, smartphone bans in schools, and statutory minimum age requirements for social media access.

Australia was the first country to implement a nationwide social media minimum age law for under-16s, applicable to selected large platforms. Early evidence suggests that its effectiveness remains mixed (Molly Rose Foundation, 2026). Initial government compliance reports indicate significant platform enforcement gaps, widespread circumvention by young users, and uneven age assurance practices. The Australia's eSafety Commissioner has emphasised that technical compliance alone does not yet demonstrate broader success in improving children's wellbeing or reducing harms (*Compliance update for the social media age restrictions*, 2026).

In Europe, on 31 March, the French Senate has passed a bill, with amendments, which aimed to protect minors from the risks associated with the use of social media. Nine countries are considering a ban, and 12 additional countries have the topic under discussion. Across these countries there are significant differences in scope and rationale, definitions of social media, definitions of risk, the appropriate age and assessments of evolving capacity, and the role of parental consent.⁹

Against this evolving legislative context, many voices,¹⁰ including the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights¹¹ cautions against blanket social media bans and emphasises that policy should focus on regulating industry and platforms, addressing harmful design, opaque algorithms, data collection, targeted advertising, reporting systems and accountability, while preserving children's rights and agency in digital environments. The European Commission has set up a special panel to advise its President on child safety online and potential age limits for social media and other online services in Europe.¹²

3 HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECT CHILDREN

Using the WHO definition as a starting point, well-being can be understood as children's ability to cope with everyday stress, realise their abilities, learn and work well, and take part in their communities. From this perspective, social media should be assessed in terms of both the opportunities and risks it may offer, and which conditions that might enable or hinder these dimensions.

3.1 CHILDREN'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

It is difficult to disentangle social media's potential impacts on children from other influences shaping children's understandings and experiences, including the influence of families, peers, educators, AI, cultural context and broader society, and of other forms of media such as

⁹ Tech Policy Press. (n.d.). *Global social media age restriction tracker*. <https://social-media-age-tracker.onrender.com/>. A growing number of organizations, policy institutes, and academic centers now systematically track the rapidly evolving global landscape of children's social media regulation, including age restrictions, access bans, age assurance systems, and broader online safety frameworks. Comparative resources such as [Tech Policy Press's Global Social Media Age Restriction Tracker](#) provide regularly updated overviews of legislative developments across jurisdictions. Organizations including [5Rights Foundation](#), [UNICEF Innocenti](#), the [OECD](#), and the [Council of Europe](#) offer broader policy analysis grounded in children's rights, online safety, and governance frameworks. Academic institutions such as the [Oxford Internet Institute](#) and the [London School of Economics' Digital Futures for Children Centre](#) further contribute comparative research on platform governance, digital childhood, and regulatory effectiveness.

¹⁰ See in particular: [5 Rights Foundation](#); [Eurochild](#); [CRIN](#); [LSE](#), and [EUKidsOnline](#).

¹¹ [Regulate platforms, not children – Commissioner urges caution over social media bans - Commissioner for Human Rights](#);

¹² [Special panel on child safety online | Shaping Europe's digital future](#)

television, films, video games and advertising. Reliable, **representative figures on children's use of social media specifically use** are challenging to establish, especially for younger children, because public surveys typically do not cover the full 0–18 age range. Eurobarometer surveys, for example, are generally representative of the population aged 15 years and over. Numbers are also to be treated with caution as many studies rely on parental input and perceptions alone, rather than asking children themselves about their actual digital access, engagement and experiences. Research has repeatedly shown that parental knowledge of children's online lives may be partial or inaccurate. For younger children, national studies and dedicated research projects such as EU Kids Online (EUKO) are therefore essential. Recent EUKO evidence (Staksrud et al., forthcoming, 2026) confirms that children's social media and digital media use is widespread and increasingly embedded in everyday life. The representative EUKO 2025 survey, covering 29,169 children aged 9–16 across 19 European countries, shows that the most frequent online activities are communication and entertainment, activities often facilitated through social media, including:

- 77% communicate with friends daily or several times a day, 66% communicate with parents or caregivers daily.
- 70% watch videos on social media, 69% listen to music, 47% stream TV shows or movies, 38% create or edit digital content and 38% use the internet for schoolwork.
- 61% use Internet at least weekly to learn something new or practice something, and 46% looked for information about what goes on in the world.

These findings follow earlier EUKO research showing that underage social media use is not new. In 2011, 15 years ago, 38% of 9–12-year-olds and 77% of 13–16-year-olds already had their own social networking profile, including one in five 9–12-year-olds with a Facebook profile despite the 13-year age limit (Livingstone et al., 2013). In 2020, daily visits to social networking sites were reported by 28% of 9–11-year-olds, 63% of 12–14-year-olds, and 77% of 15–16-year-olds, with major national variation among the youngest children, from 11% in Germany to 45% in Serbia (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 30). Taken together, these figures indicate that for decades and for a large share of children and young people, social media is an important and integral part of daily life from an early age, used across a wide range of activities and, most importantly, for maintaining contact and connection with friends and family.

3.2 BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Because any social media is, at its core, a communication environment, its possible benefits are difficult to define exhaustively. Like the offline world, it can give children access to people, communities, knowledge, culture, advice, entertainment, support, and opportunities for expression. In that sense, the potential benefits may be wide-ranging and hard to capture in a fixed list. They also depend heavily on individual circumstances, interests, skills, and abilities, family and peer relationships, language, age, disability, geography, socio-economic conditions, platform design, and national digital infrastructure. Consequently, the examples below should be read not as a complete account of what social media can offer, but as an illustration of how digital participation may support children's mental health and well-being in different ways.

Coping with the stresses of life: social media may provide access to peer support, emotional validation, help-seeking information, and communities of shared experience. For instance, a child experiencing loneliness, chronic illness, disability, bullying, minority stress, or geographic isolation may find moderated communities, relatable experiences, or signposting to support services, (see for instance Best et al., 2014; Naslund et al., 2016; Nesi et al., 2018)

Realising abilities: social media may support creativity, self-expression, building of identity, and confidence-building when children use platforms actively and constructively. Children may create and share videos, art, music, writing, educational content, campaigns, or other forms of expression, developing communication skills, digital competence, and a sense of achievement (see for instance Ito et al., 2009), and social media might help reduce inequalities and strengthen participation for vulnerable groups.

Learning well: social media may function as an informal learning environment by giving children access to knowledge, tutorials, peer learning, cultural content, and educational communities and building media and critical literacies. Children may use platforms to learn, study, health information, news and current affairs, follow educational creators, broadcasters, and civil society actors (Smahel et al., 2020), or enabling knowledge to be co-constructed through peer interaction beyond the school environment (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016).

Contributing to community: social media may enable children's participation, voice, democratic engagement, and sense of belonging, including for those with limited offline opportunities to be heard or take part. It can support children's rights to express their views, access information, associate with others, facilitate intergenerational communication, and participate in matters that affect them. Children may engage in ad hoc action, local volunteering, youth councils, awareness campaigns, public debate, and politics.

Building relationships and belonging: Finally and combining all the contributing factors to well-being as elaborate above, is the sense of belonging, among family and peers, and in and to the societies where children live. Social media may help children maintain friendships, coordinate social life, and be and feel connected to peers, family, and communities.

Considered through the lenses of well-being, we see how social media can also support important dimensions of children's human rights. Opportunities for social belonging, learning, creativity, access to information, self-expression, peer support, and democratic participation are relevant to mental health and relate directly to children's rights to provision and participation. In this sense, positive digital experiences may serve as supportive and protective factors, strengthening knowledge, resilience, agency, relationships, and sense of belonging.

3.3 RISK OF HARM

The starting point for this report is the WHO operationalisation of mental health. Applied to social media, this means assessing whether online environments help or hinder children's ability to regulate stress, build a secure and realistic sense of self, concentrate and learn, and take part in social and civic life. This is broader than diagnosing anxiety or depression.

The OECD risk classification (originating from the EU Kids Online research network, later adapted by the Better Internet for Kids 4Cs framework) distinguishes **content, contact, conduct, and consumer risks**. It also highlights cross-cutting privacy, advanced-technology, and health/well-being risks. When taking social media as the starting point, it becomes clear how the same harmful experience may involve human interaction, business incentives, and platform design all at once.

As with benefits and opportunities, the list below uses the WHO definition as an operational lens. It does not claim that every listed harm is caused by social media in a simple or uniform way. Rather, it exemplifies recurring risk pathways that can undermine mental well-being in the WHO sense, that in turn can represent barriers for the enjoyment of human rights.

Coping with stresses of life: The most policy-salient risks are cyberbullying, compulsive use, late-night engagement, and self-harm or suicide-related exposure, because these directly affect emotional regulation, sleep, and perceived control. Examples include repeated checking driven by notifications; public shaming; exposure to self-harm communities; late-night scrolling.

Realising abilities: Social comparison, quantified approval, appearance pressure, and commercial profiling can distort self-concept and undermine autonomy, especially in adolescence when sensitivity to social feedback is high. Appearance-focused feeds; “like”-driven self-presentation; targeted beauty or diet ads; opaque profiling can contribute to this.

Learning and working well: Distraction, sleep disruption, and misinformation matter not only for “well-being” in the abstract, but for school performance, attention, and judgment. Notifications during learning situations; blurred advertising; risky “challenges” and misinformation can undermine learning further.

Contributing to community: Children’s participation can be chilled by harassment, hate, manipulation, privacy loss, and opaque moderation. In particular, hate or sexist abuse can silence participation, while filter bubbles and algorithmic amplification of polarising content can lead to unproductive engagement, fear and resignation.

Risk triggered by design: While social media risks can be linked to other users and communicative engagement, understanding the algorithms and addictive design which are embedded in the social media platforms that children use is critical for understanding its impacts on them. This includes but are not limited to *dark commercial patterns*, defined by OECD as interface practices that steer, deceive, coerce, or manipulate users into choices not in their interests (OECD, 2022)¹³, *persuasive design* (notifications, autoplay, push alerts, and infinite scroll), and *recursive feedback loops* (amplifying harmful and misleading content), (see also National Academies of Sciences et al., 2024).

Furthermore, reviews from the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) show that children face targeted or blurred advertising that many cannot reliably identify, and that engagement-driven ranking can promote dangerous or harmful content when such content performs well (Federal Trade Commission, 2024, p. 63). Research for the past 25 years, as well as governmental oversight have also found how most services set minimum ages, but few use systematic age assurance (see for instance Livingstone et al., 2013; OECD, 2025). The table below provides examples of different design features, and how they might operate and contribute to harm.

As noted earlier in this report, responsibility for children’s protection in the digital environment is distributed across a highly interconnected and cross-border ecosystem involving platforms, States, parents and children themselves. It is important to note how many risk-enhancing design features associated with social media also appear, or in the future might be included, in other digital services, including video-sharing platforms, games, messaging services, streaming services, educational technologies and AI-driven chatbots. This means that the relevant risks of harm are not confined to services formally defined as “social media” but may arise across digital environments that use similar design features and engagement-based business models. Examples include recommender systems, autoplay, infinite scroll, push notifications, gamified rewards, direct messaging, targeted advertising and algorithmic amplification.

¹³ The European Data Protection Board (EDPB) applies an analogous concept to social media interfaces and privacy decisions: “‘deceptive design patterns’ are considered as interfaces and user journeys implemented on social media platforms that attempt to influence users into making unintended, unwilling and potentially harmful decisions, often toward a decision that is against the users’ best interests and in favour of the social media platforms interests, regarding the processing of their personal data.” (EDPB 2022, p. 3).

Not all children face the same risks, and the same exposure does not produce the same outcome. Vulnerability is patterned by individual differences, age and development, disability and minority status, pre-existing mental health difficulties, digital literacy, family support, peer and school climate, socio-economic conditions, and platform architecture. Offline disadvantage often carries into the online environment and can be amplified there.

Table 1: Examples of design features that cause concern/harm

Design feature	Examples of how it operates	Concern / harm
Dark patterns	Overload of requests, nagging, asymmetry, hidden choices, friction to refuse or leave	Can steer children into unintended, unwilling, or harmful privacy and commercial choices; exploit limited cognitive defences and developmental immaturity
Infinite scroll / autoplay	Remove natural stopping points and keep content flowing	Encourage longer sessions, reduce self-interruption, contribute to late-night use and attention capture
Engagement-optimising recommender algorithms	Rank and recommend content based on expected engagement, dwell time, likes, comments, and recency	Can recursively amplify unwanted content such as self-harm, eating-disorder, hateful, dangerous, or misleading content; create filter bubbles and distorted salience
Targeted advertising and blurred commercial content	Personalised advertising and influencer/embedded promotions blur persuasion with ordinary content	Children often struggle to identify and evaluate advertising; associated with privacy, financial, psychological, and body-image harms
Notifications, streaks, like counts, public metrics	Deliver intermittent social rewards and prompts to return	Linked to habitual checking, fear of missing out (“FOMO”), homework and sleep interruption, and heightened social feedback sensitivity
Poor age assurance	Minimal or bypassable checks leave underage users in adult-oriented systems	OECD found how systematic age assurance remains rare and weakest where risks are highest
Weak or opaque moderation	Under-resourced, automated, or inconsistent systems miss subtle harms and coded content	Harmful networks and posts can persist; weaker moderation environments can foster more toxic communities
Overly strict or opaque moderation	Automated, risk-averse, or poorly contextual systems remove lawful, age-appropriate, or identity-related content	Children may lose access to information, self-expression and participation; marginalised children may be disproportionately silenced or excluded from online communities.
Weak privacy defaults	Public settings, complex menus, and broad data collection normalise over-disclosure and profiling	Hard for children to make informed, protective decisions; increases tracking and commercial exploitation

4 EVIDENCE FROM RESEARCH

The strongest conclusion from the current research literature is not that social media is uniformly harmful or uniformly harmless. Rather, the best available evidence shows that average associations between general or time-based social media use and youth mental health are usually small, heterogeneous, and highly dependent on what is measured. Recent umbrella reviews characterise the literature as weak, inconsistent, or context-dependent overall, and large syntheses continue to find substantial heterogeneity across studies.

The relationship between social media and mental health in children and adolescents is perhaps best understood as heterogeneous, conditional, and mechanism-dependent, not as uniformly harmful or uniformly benign. As noted by the US National Academies in their review (National Academies of Sciences et al., 2024), most of the research has established only an association between social media use and different mental and physical health outcomes, and was therefore not considered sufficient as an evidence base to recommend restrictions on young people's access to social media. Rather recommendations were given towards support systems, education, design features and accountability of platforms.

Across umbrella reviews and large meta-analyses, the average association between broad social media use and outcomes such as depression, anxiety, or general well-being is usually small and often inconsistent. This helps explain why public debate often appears polarised: studies using crude indicators such as total time spent tend to produce weaker and more variable findings than studies examining problematic use, social comparison, cyberbullying, or sleep disruption. Recent umbrella reviews by Valkenburg et al. (2022), Sala et al. (2024), and Tølbøll (2026) all converge on this basic point, while the 2024 JAMA Pediatrics meta-analysis by Fassi and colleagues quantifies the average social media–internalising association as small but positive, with high variability in study results and a notable lack of research on clinical populations (Fassi et al., 2024).

Recommender systems can create child-specific and unevenly distributed risks by curating and amplifying exposure to unsuitable, harmful, or stereotype-reinforcing content; emerging research shows that these risks are often conditional, context-dependent, and concentrated among a relatively small subset of children, underscoring the need for more granular, individual child-centred risk assessments that go beyond broad population-level measures under frameworks such as the DSA (Ungruh & Pera, 2026). The research literature indicates meaningful subgroup variation both for potential harms and benefits, and how some vulnerable groups merit special attention. For instance, some researches have found how girls more often show stronger associations for depressive symptoms, body image harms, and sleep-mediated pathways. The Kelly and Viner analyses of UK cohort data found that poor sleep, cyberbullying, poor body image, and low self-esteem explained much of the social media–depression association, particularly among girls (Kelly et al., 2018). Berger et al.'s (2022) systematic review suggests that LGBTQ youth can derive genuine benefits from social media through identity management, peer connection, and support.

One of the principal limitations of the evidence base is that it still lacks sufficiently rich, platform-level exposure data. Too many studies rely on self-reported hours focusing on screentime rather than social media use specifically, and too few can observe what content was actually seen, how it was ranked, whether it was appearance-focused or self-harm-related, or how exposure varied by vulnerability and time of day.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on current evidence, the most defensible conclusion is that social media is best treated as a complex social and commercial environment that can worsen youth mental health under identifiable conditions, especially when use becomes compulsive, comparison-heavy, sleep-displacing, or under abusive conditions, and where offline and online conditions are likely to influence each other (for example bullying experiences) as well as the outcome for mental health and well-being. Current design choices increase the probability, persistence, and inequitable distribution of harm, especially for children already facing stress, exclusion, low literacy, or mental health difficulties.

In this context, policies such as blanket bans on specific services of specific ages, or access restrictions and content control may reduce some risks of harm for some groups of children, while simultaneously limiting the same children or other groups of children's equal rights to participation, privacy, information, and evolving autonomy, as well as potentially creating new and adverse consequences. These consequences might be on the individual, social and societal level.

This creates a fundamental policy challenge: how can policies balance child protection and reducing harm, with preserving children's rights and strengthening the democratic robustness of societies, in societies that are themselves increasingly dependent on digital infrastructures for communication, education, economic participation, and democratic life? Effective policy making, in line with the requirements and expectations set out by human rights provisions, therefore requires a nuanced understanding of:

- What children and young people actually use social media for;
- Which groups may face heightened risks or vulnerabilities and under which conditions;
- The quality and limitations of current evidence on harms;
- The potential unintended and adverse consequences of regulation, bans, or age restrictions on different groups of children, families, and societies at large;
- Where children might migrate to, if not on major social media platforms, and how to assess and understand the short- and long-term effects of this;
- How to ensure legitimacy, proportionality, and rights-based governance;
- The effectiveness, enforceability and trustworthiness of different regulatory instruments.

In addition, understanding parental concern is an important part of informing regulatory responses, while also critically assessing broader assumptions about childhood, technology, and risk. Clear, evidence-informed communication about regulatory aims, choices, and trade-offs can help strengthen public understanding, legitimacy, and support, in particular when the most effective regulatory and policy measures in terms of children's well-being related to social media may not fully align with all parental expectations of what type of regulation should be implemented.

The thematic exchange among policy makers, experts, scholars and children and young people aim to inform further policy discussions, while situating within this broader historical, legal, social, and normative context. The central questions are not merely whether social media should be regulated, but rather what societies seek to protect, what risks are substantiated, how interventions can be justified, and how children's rights, wellbeing, and participation can be balanced in an increasingly digital world.

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