

'Strict prohibition often breeds secrecy, not safety': Aussie social media ban draws fire; experts divided

TNN | Dec 2, 2025, 04.09 PM IST



The under-16 social media ban in Australia, which comes into effect from December 10, has ignited a global debate — over safety, adolescence, and the future of online life

Evidence for bans is thin, say researchers

Experts caution that the policy is sprinting ahead of science. Dr Clare Southerton, School of Education Culture & Society, faculty of education, Monash University, Australia, says research hasn't yet linked age-based bans to reduced harm. What is clear, she asserts, is that social media provides vital networks for youngsters, especially the most vulnerable. She emphasises communication instead of a ban: "Take their feelings seriously. Don't dismiss them.

Build trust so they come to you when something unsafe happens."

Is a ban the right solution?

Experts remain divided. Calcutta High Court advocate Subhadip Choudhuri says a blanket ban “conflicts with freedom of expression” and that a smarter regulation would work better. Kaushal Bheda, director of online security firm Pelorus Technologies warns bans may simply push teen-agers towards VPNs and unregulated spaces. Psychiatrist Dr Neetu Tiwari notes that prohibition “breeds secrecy, not safety,” while Anamika Dasgupta, director, The Wonder School Pune fears increased loneliness without strong community support.

Dr Taylor Elizabeth, emotional intelligence and etiquette coach, and founder and CEO of The Elegance Advisor adds, "Removing the stimulus doesn't automatically build the skill. A full ban may protect them at the moment, but it can also disconnect them from their social world and delay the emotional skills they eventually need"

Others see upsides. Dr Malini Saba, psychologist, human and social rights activist and founder of the Saba Family Foundations notes that reducing screen time can improve sleep, emotional regulation and overall attention — provided it isn't imposed as punishment.

‘Social media is a culture for teens’

Marketers and sociologists argue the ban ignores how deeply online spaces shape teen life. Suyash Lahoti, partner at Wit & Chai Group, a creative marketing agency, puts it bluntly: “Asking teenagers to quit Instagram is like asking millennials to abandon electricity. Social media is where they date, debate, dream and discover careers — it’s a culture, not just entertainment.”

Parent and teacher Subha Mukherjee Raha says, "Teenagers, with their impressionable minds, may follow trends that expose them to cyberbullying and hatred. Whether social media is a boon or a curse depends on the user’s

maturity and proper guidance."

Another parent, Susmita Bera, argues for balanced regulation: "It isn't right to completely ban social media, but there should be restrictions like fixed timings. Late-night browsing is causing health issues including attention deficiency and lack of patience."

Students also see both sides. School student Samriddhi Mukhopadhyay notes, "Social media has two effects. While it helps in long-distance communication, exploring new ideas, and seeking study support, it also affects mental health, leads to body-shaming, distraction, and sleep disruption."

Algorithms can learn teen triggers, emotions and behavioural patterns with startling accuracy. This makes teens susceptible to political influence, disinformation, & what experts call 'cognitive warfare'

Kaushal Bheda

'If India tries this, classrooms will change'

Indian educators say an Australia-style ban would bring mixed results. Alka Kapur, principal, Modern Public School, Shalimar Bagh, notes it may reduce distraction and improve mental health, but "enforcement would be next to impossible," and could erase the academic benefits of online collaboration and information sharing. Students are also conflicted. Samriddhi Mukhopadhyay, a Kolkata-based school student, agrees that social media helps them learn and stay connected, "but also brings with it body shaming, distractions, and sleep disruption."

Ambika Chawla, who is a child psychologist at Lissun sees a creative upside: less digital noise, more real-world thinking.

Enforcement will be the real test

Even if Australia's ban survives the courtroom, the next challenge is practical: how do you stop tech-savvy teenagers from posing as adults?

Ankush Tiwari, CEO of pi-labs, which safeguards business communications and high-value transactions says enforcement will make or break the law. Some platforms are moving fast. Snapchat has begun age-verifying users via ConnectID, which links to bank-verified details and offers yes/no age confirmation without exposing personal data.

"It's far harder to fake a bank-verified age," Tiwari says. But whether teens can be kept out — or will simply find loopholes — remains uncertain.

According to Statista, a portal for market data 618 million under-18 online gamers are in the US alone. Most use games as chat rooms. Roby John, CEO & co-founder of SuperGaming, a company which builds India's gaming revolution says that gaming companies are trying to design safer systems.

Not a great way to spend time: Elon

In some of his recent interviews, Elon Musk voiced his concern about dopamine generating videos on social media affecting teenagers. "You do get a kick out of it... it's like a drug." He also urged parents to limit the amount

of social media that children see “because they’re being programmed by a dopamine-maximising AI” that’s not good for their mental health.

Around the world, the rules are tightening

Countries across Europe and Asia are introducing age checks, raising minimum ages and curbing device use in classrooms, and yet there’s no consensus on how to balance protection, and teen autonomy

Meanwhile in Singapore

From January 2026, Singapore will bar secondary school students from using smartphones and smartwatches outside of lesson time, including recess, CCAs and even supplementary, enrichment and remedial lessons. The tightened guidelines align with restrictions already implemented for primary school pupils since January 2025. Announced on Nov 30, the revised rules are part of a broader MOE initiative to help children and parents develop healthier digital habits.

During school hours, devices must be stored in lockers or bags, with smartwatches included as they allow messaging and app use that can distract students. MOE noted that several secondary schools that adopted the rules earlier saw “improved student well-being, enhanced focus, and more physical interaction”. Personal learning devices will also enter sleep mode from 10.30pm to 6.30am to “nudge students to sleep earlier”. Minister of State for Education Jasmin Lau said: “We need to find a healthy balance and recognise that habits form early,” emphasising the long-term benefits of responsible device use.

Bullet box: How to help teens without banning platforms

- Teach teens to decode algorithms, validation loops and influencer culture.

- Set daily/weekly screen-time caps, instead of cutting them off entirely.
- Monitor content and keep communication open.
- Build a strong home ecosystem—sleep routines, physical activity, family time and emotional openness.

Inputs by Suyash Lahoti and BG Girish Chandra, medical director & chief psychiatrist at Maarga Mindcare, Stand Alone Specialty Hospital for Mental Health, Bengaluru