

Less bans, more empowerment: Why a social media ban *is not* the right way forward

Kill the bad, preserve the good



For today's teenagers, the online world is not a space of passive consumption — it is a central part of growing up. Our recent survey of over **3,300 minors aged 12–17 across Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Poland** shows that social media plays a meaningful role in young people's lives: it is where they learn, connect, express themselves, and stay informed. Two-thirds say it is their main way of keeping in touch with people they care about, and six in ten use it to learn new things or follow current events.

Any policy response must start from this reality.

Bans are a simplistic response to a complex challenge

Concerns about harmful content, addictive design, and online risks are widely shared — including by young people themselves. But banning social media is neither an effective nor a sustainable solution: it is just an easy way out. **Such bans risk becoming a shortcut that avoids addressing the systemic causes of harm.**

It is up to digital platforms to ensure that the content they provide is safe for minors. Blanket bans simply shift this responsibility onto young people, parents, and schools — contrary to where EU law, like Digital Service Act, places it: with the platforms

Measures such as age verification can help: to provide age-appropriate content, platforms need to know who their users are. However, age verification is not the same as a blanket ban; it is a tool to enforce platform responsibility and protect minors online.



Age limits don't keep teens safe online

Our findings show that social media use starts early. Almost all teens are active on multiple platforms, and many joined before the official age of 13. This indicates that **current age verification systems are not performing, but also that minors feel the need to circumvent age restrictions.**

While younger teens may see some value in age limits, support declines sharply with age. By 16, almost none support restrictions applied to themselves. This highlights the **limits of age-restrictions as a standalone measure as they do not prevent early access, nor do they make online environments safer.**



Empower young people: effective policy must reflect teens' experiences

This is not a naive generation. **They know the benefits of being online but are equally aware of the risks.** Many have faced threats first-hand - from hate speech (14%) to unsolicited explicit content (11%). Some (8%) have been stalked, and 7% threatened with the non-consensual sharing of intimate photos. At the same time, they adopt protective strategies: adjusting privacy settings, filtering friend requests, limiting location sharing.

This paints a picture of **a generation that is aware, resourceful, and resilient - but still vulnerable.** And they are asking for policymakers' help, not by shutting doors, but by building smarter ones.



What young people need from policymakers and platforms

- ✚ **Safety by design:** Platforms should integrate default protections, filters, and minor-specific settings so that safety is built in from the start.
- ✚ **Greater user control:** Teens want meaningful tools to shape their feeds, set screen-time limits, and access easy reporting channels, giving them real agency over their digital lives.
- ✚ **Real platform accountability:** Clear responsibilities for platforms, timely action on harmful content, and meaningful consequences for non-compliance.
- ✚ **Agency over manipulation:** Solid safeguards and real control should protect teens from manipulation and empower them to define for themselves how algorithms shape their online experience, without restricting access to the benefits of digital life.

Beyond bans: building a digital world designed for minors, together with minors

Banning social media does not solve the problem, it merely postpones it. Teens rely on digital spaces for connection, learning, and identity, and want control over their feeds, screen-time limits, and easy reporting. They seek nuanced solutions that balance safety with the benefits of online life.

Smart regulation, platform accountability, parental guidance, and youth engagement can create a “minor-proof” digital world. Protecting young people means building safe, fair, and empowering spaces with minors, not just for them.