

Logged In, Left out

**What Adolescents Really
Think About the Proposed
👉 Social Media Age Ban
in the Netherlands**



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What Adolescents really think about the Proposed Social Media Age Ban in the Netherlands



Logged in, Left out is a survey study exploring the perspectives of adolescents aged 13–15 years in the Netherlands on age-based restrictions for social media use. This report is an outcome of the *Getting Louder on Protecting Children Online* project, which aims to influence the narrative around online child safety.

The study was conducted by **Terre des Hommes Netherlands**, a children's rights organisation that has been committed to protecting children worldwide for

over 60 years. We advocate for the prevention of all forms of (online) violence against children, particularly in situations where they are at risk of exploitation and abuse. Child participation is a fundamental part of this commitment and is systematically used to continuously improve the work and approach of Terre des Hommes Netherlands. The best interests of the child are always central, with children recognised as experts in their own lives.

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Contents

Introduction	5
Methodology	6
Disability, mental health, and adolescents' digital experiences	7
Patterns of usage of and experiences on social media platforms	9
Daily social media usage	9
Using phones and social media as a space for Connection, expression, and wellbeing	9
Adolescents' perception on online safety on social media	12
Adolescents' perspectives on a social media age ban	15
(Dis)agreement with a social media age ban	15
How adolescents define the right age for social media	17
Reasoning behind preferred age to start social media	18
How a social media age ban would affect adolescents	20
Perceived effectiveness of a social media ban	21
If banning social media isn't the answer, what is?	23
Inclusion of adolescents in the decision-making process	24
Conclusion and Recommendations	25
References	27

List of figures and tables

- Table 1.** Gender and age distribution across respondents (% , N) **6**
- Table 2.** Types of difficulties among those reporting a functional difficulty (% , n=231) **7**
- Table 3.** Types of difficulties among those reporting a mental health challenge(% , n=236) **8**
- Figure 1.** Daily time spent on social media (%) **9**
- Figure 2.** Responses to “Do you feel safe using social media?” (%) **12**
- Figure 3.** Distribution of responses to ‘Do you agree or disagree with a social media age ban?’ (%) **15**
- Table 4.** Age distribution of responses to ‘do you agree or disagree with a social media age ban?’ (%) **16**
- Table 5.** Distribution of responses to “Do you agree or disagree with a social media age ban?” by disability and mental health status (%) **16**
- Figure 4.** Responses to “What would have been the best age to start social media?” (%) **17**
- Table 6.** Age distribution of Responses to “What is the appropriate age to start using social media?” (%) **18**
- Table 7.** Overview of the core reasons to choose preferred age to start social media **19**
- Table 8.** Distribution of total responses to responses to “Is a blanket age ban on social media the most effective measure to ensure children’s safety online?” (%) **20**
- Figure 5.** The amount of responses per online safety measurement **24**

Introduction

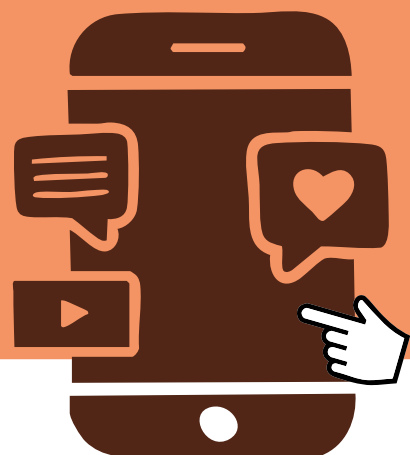


Recently, the ever-expanding presence of digital devices in everyday life has deeply integrated digital communication, learning, play, and services into the daily lives of families and their children (Roth et al., 2024). Children use these devices to communicate and stay connected with friends and classmates, as well as for entertainment and educational purposes (OECD, 2025). The use of social media among children, however, has become a prominent topic of discussion across academic, media, and policy spheres. Growing concerns have emerged about the safety risks children face online, as well as the potential negative impacts of social media on their overall well-being, with an increasing number of children showing signs of excessive or problematic phone use (ECPAT International et al., 2024; WHO, 2024).

In response, governments and regulators around the world, including the Netherlands, are considering policies to address the risks children face on social media. There is a mounting call for stricter age-based regulations on social media usage, including proposals to permanently ban children from accessing platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat. When considering such policies, it is essential to centre the perspectives of children themselves. Their voices are often missing from public debate and policymaking. Yet they are among the most active users of digital platforms, and any intervention will directly affect their ability to participate meaningfully in digital spaces.

Therefore, Terre des Hommes Netherlands conducted an exploratory study to understand adolescents' views on age-based restrictions for social media use, referred to in this study as a "social media age ban." The study aims to highlight children's perspectives rather than to produce generalisable or statistically significant findings. It does so by addressing the following research questions:

- 1 Using an intersectional lens, what are adolescents aged 13 to 15 years old's views on the conversation on social media age ban directly affecting them?**
- 2 How do adolescents evaluate an age ban on social media compared to other safety approaches (e.g., regulation, education, platform design changes)?**
- 3 How do adolescents want to be involved in decisions about online safety and social media policies?**



Methodology

This study developed a survey consisting of nineteen closed- and open-ended questions: fourteen multiple-choice questions, in which respondents could select either one or multiple options, and five open-ended questions, four of which asked respondents to elaborate on their selections. We combined closed- and open-ended questions not only to capture whether children simply supported or opposed a social media age ban, but also to explore their reasoning, emotional reactions, and ideas for more effective or inclusive approaches.

The survey was disseminated by an independent survey provider through its established channels to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The target group consisted of adolescents aged 13 to 15 living in the Netherlands, as they are directly affected by a potential social media age ban. In total, **501 adolescents** aged 13-15 based in the Netherlands completed the survey (see Table 1 below). While the majority identified as girls or boys, two respondents identified as non-binary and one as 'other'. Due to this small sample size, the data for these gender categories is not statistically reliable for drawing broad conclusions.

Table 1. Gender and Age distribution across respondents (% , N)

TOTAL	GENDER				AGE		
	GIRL	BOY	NON-BINARY	OTHER	13 YEARS OLD	14 YEARS OLD	15 YEARS OLD
	53% 265	47% 233	0.4% 2	0.2% 1	29% 145	37% 184	34% 172

The analysis of the answers consisted of a quantitative analysis of the closed-ended questions and a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions. For the quantitative data analysis, it focused on descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages of responses by question), including crosstabs by age, gender and disability. For the qualitative data analysis, we conducted a thematic analysis using deductive and inductive coding. Responses were reviewed and coded into key themes.

Disability, Mental Health, and Adolescents' Digital Experiences



Intersectionality refers to the way multiple aspects of a person's identity, such as age, gender, disability, and wellbeing, interact to shape their experiences and opportunities (Crenshaw, 1989). This study applied an intersectional lens, recognising that children's experiences and views on digital safety and exclusion vary based on intersecting identities, and examined how responses differ among children of different gender identities, age groups, and disabilities.

To assess whether a respondent has a disability, we adopted the Washington Group framework, drawing particularly on the Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (2016). This framework consists

of a set of functional difficulties (listed below) designed to assess functional, behavioural, and social difficulties that children and young people may experience in their daily lives.

46% of adolescents reported experiencing at least one type of functional difficulty, while 54% reported none. Across genders, boys reported slightly higher rates of functional and behavioural difficulties, such as self-care and controlling behaviour, while girls showed marginally higher social and emotional difficulties, such as making friends. Differences across age groups are generally minor: notable differences are social and emotional rather than physical.

Table 2. Types of Difficulties Among Those Reporting a functional difficulty (% , N=231)

Seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses	9%
Hearing sounds like people's voices or music, even when using a hearing aid	4%
Walking or climbing stairs without help or equipment	3%
Feeding or dressing yourself (self-care activities)	7%
Being understood when you speak by people outside your household	13%
Learning things compared to other children your age	21%
Remembering things compared to other children your age	17%
Concentrating on an activity you enjoy	23%
Accepting changes in your routine	43%
Controlling your behaviour compared to other children your age	21%
Making friends	36%

We also asked respondents whether they have recently been bothered by any feelings or experiences related to their mental health. The purpose of this question was informed by evidence that children's mental health influences how they experience and respond to online risks and opportunities; those experiencing emotional distress may be more susceptible to online harm (Livingstone et al., 2017a; Hollis et al., 2020; WHO, 2024).

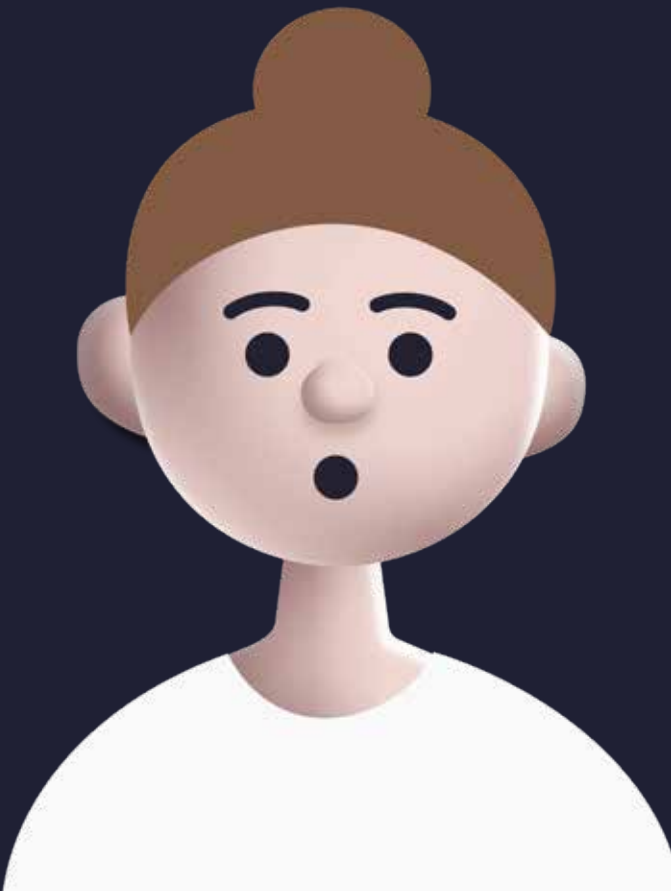
Nearly half of adolescents (47%) reported at least one experience related to mental health challenges, and girls reporting higher levels than boys, particularly in relation to sadness and self-esteem. Meanwhile, concentration issues were slightly more common among boys. Though responses were

relatively consistent across ages 13–15, there was also a small increase in concentration difficulties among older children.

By focusing on specific groups, such as children experiencing a disability and/or mental health challenge, the aim is not to reduce children to labels or reinforce stereotypes, but to acknowledge how they can shape online experiences in meaningful ways. We recognise that terminology evolves over time and that children are always more than the categories used in this research. However, identifying groups allows us to explore unique risks and protective factors, and to ensure that children's diverse perspectives are reflected in practice, advocacy, and policy (Terre des Hommes, 2026).

Table 3. Types of Difficulties Among Those Reporting a Mental Health Challenge (% , N=236)

Been bothered by feeling sad, down, depressed, or hopeless	39%
Trouble concentrating on things such as reading or watching videos	43%
Little interest or pleasure in doing things	29%
Been bothered by feeling bad about yourself, feeling that you are a failure, feeling that you are worthless, or feeling guilt that you have let yourself or your family down	39%



Patterns of usage of and experiences on social media platforms

In order to grasp respondents' perspectives on a potential social media age ban, we first need to understand their mobile phone habits, social media use and online experiences. Respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spend on social media each day, what they use social media for, and how they perceive online safety.

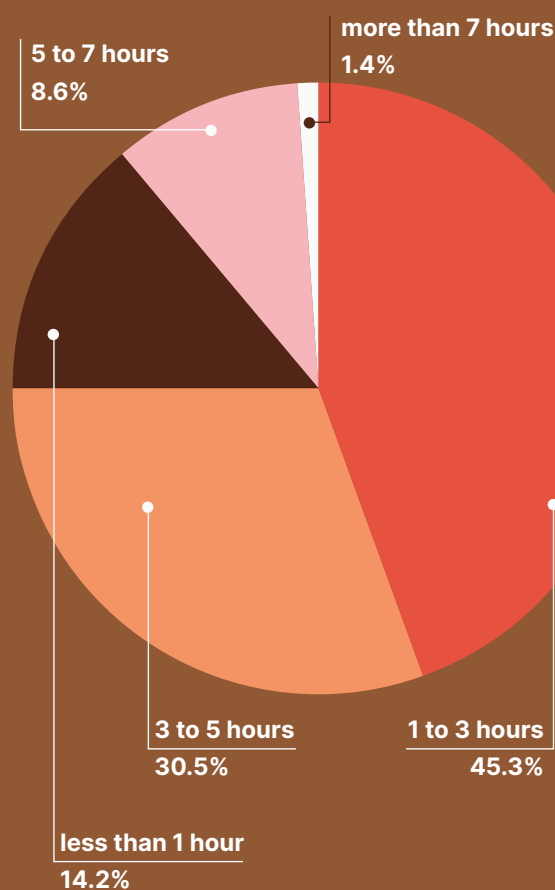
DAILY SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

45% of adolescents reported spending 1-3 hours daily on social media and 31% spend 3-5 hours a day. A smaller share of respondents are at either extreme: 14% less than 1 hour, and 10%+ more than 5 hours a day (9% for 5-7 hours, 1% for 7+ hours).

No significant gender differences in time spent on social media were observed, with boys and girls showing nearly identical patterns. Across age groups, daily social media use is broadly similar, with the majority in each group spending 1-3 hours per day. There are, however, some slight variations: thirteen-year-olds are more likely to spend less than 1 hour on social media, 15-year-olds tend to spend 3-5 hours per day, while 14-year-olds are more inclined to spend the most time online, ranging from 5 to 7 or more hours.

There is a distinction between adolescents with and without a disability and/or mental health challenges. Respondents with a mental health challenge are more likely to spend 3-5 hours on social media daily (37%) compared to those without (25%). Additionally, respondents with a disability and/or a mental health challenge are more likely to spend 5-7 hours on social media (13.5%) than those without (4%).

Figure 1.
Daily Time Spent on Social Media (%)



USING PHONES AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS A SPACE FOR CONNECTION, EXPRESSION, AND WELLBEING

The findings reveal that adolescents' engagement with their phones and social media is social, creative, and emotionally meaningful. Most use their phones for entertainment and connection, with watching videos (85%), messaging or chatting (80%), and scrolling social media (62%) emerging as their top activities. Fewer respondents said they used their phones for schoolwork, nevertheless, this still made up almost half the number of respondents (45%). Adolescents' passive use of social media through scrolling is almost double that of active use through posting on social media (62% compared to 33%). Therefore, passive and active use do not appear to be isolated distractions but rather that they form

a digital extension of children's everyday leisure, developmental, and social worlds. Social media, in particular, provides avenues for communication with peers, as 64% of respondents said they enjoy talking with friends online.

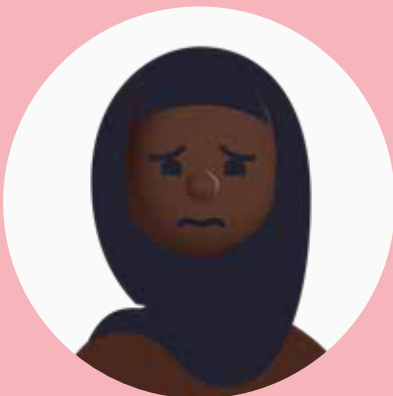
Across gender categories, phones and social media are used differently and serve distinct purposes. While boys and girls share broadly similar habits, the nature of their engagement differs. Boys are more inclined toward entertainment-driven use, such as gaming and watching funny or creative videos, whereas girls use their phones and social media more socially, creatively and expressively to message friends and/or family and express themselves through posting content.

Gender and Use: Different Expressions but Shared Needs



Boys are more likely to ...

- Use their phones to play games (67% vs. 33%)
- Use social media to watch funny or creative videos (76% vs. 68%)



Girls are more likely to ...

- Use their phones to message friends and/or family (85% vs. 75%), listen to music or podcasts (66% vs. 48%) and scroll through social media (66% vs. 58%).
- Use social media to talk with friends (69% vs. 59%), relax (51% vs. 45%), find inspiration (23% vs. 12%), and express themselves (15% vs. 9%).

Across the age groups, patterns of phone and social media use for enjoyment remains fairly consistent. Whether for watching videos (between 70-74%), talking with friends (between 60-68%), or for relaxing (between 45-51%), adolescents' reasoning is stable.

Across ages, phones and social media use remains steady



70-74%

use it to watch videos



60-68%

use it to talk to friends



45-51%

use it to relax

Among those reporting a disability and/or mental health challenge, social media and phone use serve adaptive coping functions. Adolescents experiencing mental health challenges are more likely to turn to social media for relaxation or stress relief (52%), than those without a mental health challenge (45%). Meanwhile, those with a disability are more likely to use social media as a means of learning something new (20%), than those without one (15%).

These findings might suggest that using their phones and social media offers a sense of comfort, normalcy, and/or community. The findings also challenge the notion that social media is inherently bad for children. Instead, for many children who report having a disability and/or mental health challenge, it appears to offer an accessible form of distraction from stress and avenue for learning.

Disability and/or mental health challenges and Digital Coping



52%

Adolescents experiencing a mental health challenge are more likely to use social media to relax and for stress relief



20%

Adolescents with a disability are more likely to use social media as a way to learn something new

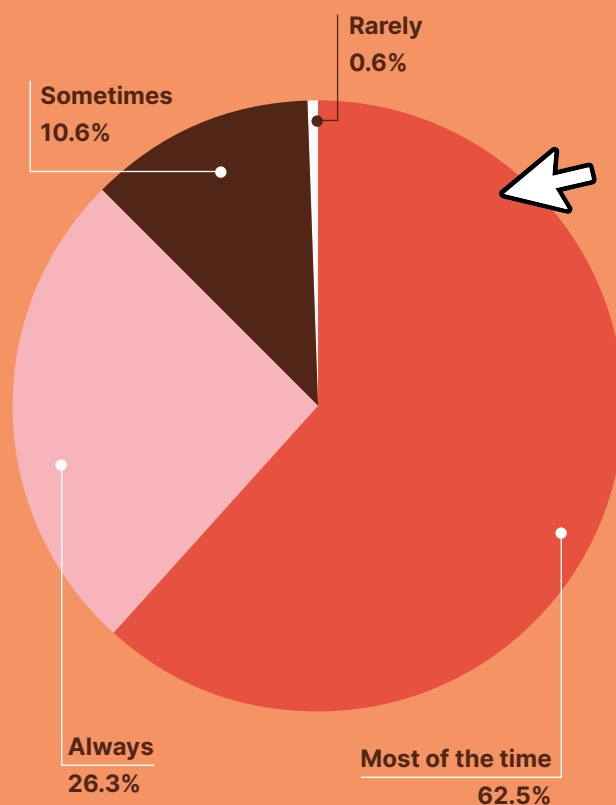
ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTION ON ONLINE SAFETY ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Overall, most adolescents reported feeling safe on social media, though the findings reveal important differences that highlight where online environments remain unevenly protective. While 62% of respondents said they feel safe most of the time and 26% always feel safe, 12% (combined) only sometimes or rarely feel safe.

The most common concern raised by respondents about feeling unsafe on social media was **receiving messages from strangers** (43%), followed by **fake accounts or bots** (35%), **seeing upsetting or scary posts** (27%), and **having personal information or pictures shared without consent** (26%). A smaller share felt unsafe due to feeling judged or compared to others (17%), while 8% cited not knowing how to report or block things. However, almost a quarter (23%) said none of these factors make them feel unsafe, suggesting that confidence and risk awareness vary among children.

Gender differences are among the most pronounced in adolescents' perceptions of safety on social media. Findings suggest that while girls in the Netherlands generally feel safe, they report greater sensitivity to certain online risks on social media, especially unwanted contact by strangers. Boys tend to express higher overall confidence online, though this may also reflect differences in perception, openness about risk, or gender norms that invisibilise boys' vulnerabilities to online risks (Livingstone, 2023).

Figure 2. Responses to "Do you feel safe using social media?" (%)



Online Safety:

A Gendered Experience



Boys tend to feel safer online than girls

Boys were more likely to *always feel safe* on social media (**33% vs. 21%**), while girls were more likely to *feel safe most of the time* (**66% vs. 58%**).



Across most risk factors, girls feel less safe online than boys.

- Girls were more likely to report feeling unsafe across more than half of the listed risk factors.
- Nearly half of girls (**49%**) said that strangers messaging them made them feel unsafe, compared to **36%** of boys.
- Girls were also more likely to feel judged or compared to others (**22% vs. 12%**).
- Boys were more likely to say that none of these factors made them feel unsafe (**28% vs. 19%**).

Across age groups, there were subtle patterns in online safety perceptions. Perceptions of *always* feeling safe increased slightly with age: 23% of 13-year-olds, 25% of 14-year-olds, and 30% of 15-year-olds said they always feel safe. The majority of each age group also reported feeling safe using social media *most of the time* (59-66%), with younger children at the higher end of this range and the proportion gradually decreasing with age, which could possibly suggest that as children grow older, some move from feeling safe “most of the time” to “always feeling safe.” Factors contributing to social media safety risk perceptions showed no consistent trend, and fell within similar ranges across age groups. Overall, age differences appear modest, suggesting that experience and maturity may play a role, but they do not eliminate social media safety risks.

The strongest disparities appeared among adolescents with a disability and/or mental health challenge and those without. Respondents reporting a disability and/or mental health challenge feel less safe online, with half attributing this to receiving messages from strangers. This may indicate they face heightened vulnerability using social media.

The combined findings demonstrate that adolescents’ perceptions on online safety are diverse and shaped by gender, disability, and/or mental health, and personal experience, not simply by age. Most feel safe, but a significant minority do not.

¹ Factors asked in this question were: strangers messaging me; seeing upsetting or scary posts; fake accounts or bots; not knowing how to report or block things; feeling judged or compared to others; having my personal information or pictures shared without consent; and none of these. Respondents could also indicate ‘other’ and specify their answers.

How do children with disabilities or mental health challenges experience online safety?



Adolescents with a disability and/or mental health challenge report lower levels of online safety when using social media.

- They are half as likely to report always feeling safe (17.5% vs. 34.5% of their peers without these challenges).



- They are three times more likely to report only sometimes feeling safe (17% vs. 5%).



Across all risk factors, adolescents with a disability and/or mental health challenge feel less safe online than those without.

- Half (50%) said strangers messaging them made them feel unsafe (vs. 37% of those without reporting such difficulties).

- They were more likely to feel unsafe due to seeing upsetting posts (33.5% vs. 22%), feeling judged or compared to others (24% vs. 11%), and having information shared without their consent (31% vs. 22%).



- They were half as likely to report that none of these factors made them feel unsafe (13% vs. 32.5%).

Adolescents' perspectives on a social media age ban

Adolescents were asked several questions regarding a potential social media age ban. They shared their perspectives on the ban itself, its effectiveness, and possible alternative regulations. Additionally, they expressed how such a ban might affect their daily lives, including their ability to communicate, access information, and engage in online spaces.

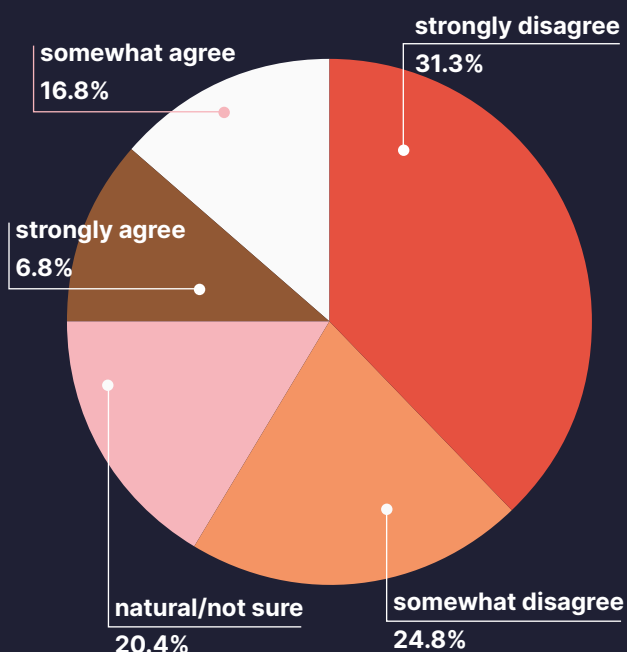
(DIS)AGREEMENT WITH A SOCIAL MEDIA AGE BAN

When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a potential social media age ban, more than half of respondents (56%) expressed disagreement. Notably, the largest portion fell into the “Strongly disagree” category, which accounted for 31% of all responses. In contrast, 24% of adolescents supported the measure, with 7% indicating they “Strongly agree” and 17% selecting “Somewhat agree.” Meanwhile, one-fifth of respondents (20%) reported feeling neutral or unsure about the proposed ban.

The opposition of a social media ban remains the dominant sentiment for both girls and boys. The difference in their levels of support for a ban is minor, with girls showing only a slightly higher rate of total support (26%) compared to boys (21%). This may be explained by their differing social media usage patterns, where girls tend to use these platforms more for communication and self-expression and feel less safe online than boys, reporting greater sensitivity to certain risks, particularly unwanted contact.

In regards to age groups, opposition levels against the social media ban are stable, ranging from 54% to 58% across the three ages. The oldest age group in the survey shows highest support for a ban (30% total support) compared to 14-year-olds (18%). 15-year-olds are less likely to be undecided (15%) compared to 13- and 14-year-olds (23% for both). This may suggest that opinions become more solidified as respondents grow older, potentially due to greater online experience and an increased understanding

Figure 3. Distribution of responses to ‘Do you agree or disagree with a social media age ban?’ (%)



“I would be disappointed, but it is not the end of the world.”

(13-year-old boy, Netherlands).

Table 5. Age distribution of responses to 'Do you agree or disagree with a social media age ban?' (%)

Age groups

	13 years old	14 years old	15 years old
Strongly agree	6%	5%	9%
Somewhat agree	17%	13%	21%
Neutral / Not sure	23%	23%	15%
Somewhat disagree	21%	28%	24%
Strongly disagree	33%	30%	31%

A larger majority of adolescents who reported no disability or mental health challenges were opposed to the ban (60-63% opposition) versus those reporting difficulties (48-52% opposition). Respondents who reported having any functional difficulty were twice as likely to support the social media ban (32% support) compared to those who reported no difficulties (16% support). This pattern holds true when focusing specifically on mental

health challenges, where 30% of those affected agreed with the ban, versus 18% of those without. These differences may be related to the disparities observed in daily time spent on social media and in the degree of feeling safe online. Adolescents with difficulty tend to spend more time on social media each day and report feeling less safe.

Table 6. Distribution of Responses to "Do You Agree or Disagree With a Social Media Age Ban?" by Disability and Mental Health Status (%)

	Disability		Mental Health Challenge	
	Has disability	Has no disability	Has mental health challenge	Has no mental health challenge
Strongly agree	9%	5%	8%	6%
Somewhat agree	23%	11%	22%	12%
Neutral / Not sure	20%	20%	18%	22%
Somewhat disagree	23%	26%	24%	25%
Strongly disagree	25%	37%	28%	35%

HOW ADOLESCENTS DEFINE THE RIGHT AGE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

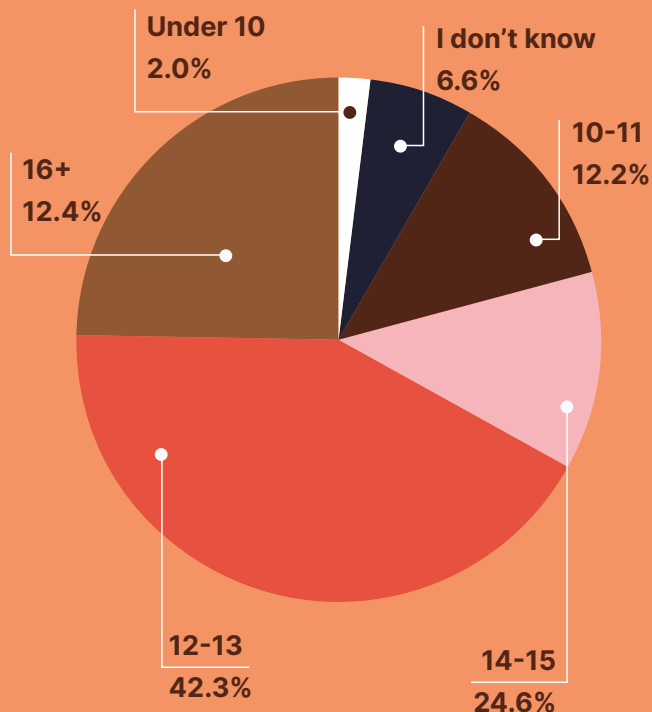
Most popular social media platforms (such as Instagram and TikTok) set a minimum age requirement of 13 years old to create an account. Proposed social media age bans aim to raise this age limit (EU Commission, 2025). But what do children think is the best age to start using social media?

A vast majority of the adolescents in the study indicated that a suitable start to social media is during early-to-mid teenage years. Most respondents (42%) chose 12-13 years old as the preferred age range. Fewer than 15% of respondents believed children should start before age 12 and 12% favoured waiting until age 16 or older.

Gender differences were small: girls were somewhat more likely than boys to suggest the 12-13 age range (45% vs 39%), while boys showed higher preference for the 10-11 year range (15% vs 10%).

Notable differences emerged between the age groups. As said, across all age categories, the majority of adolescents indicated a preference for initiating social media use at 12 to 13 years old. The key variation lies in the preferences for the age ranges 10-11 and 14-15. Specifically, 21% of 13-year-old respondents favored a starting age of 10-11, whereas 31% of 15-year-olds preferred a starting age of 14-15. This suggests that younger children tend to support earlier access to social media, while older children are more likely to endorse delayed access.

Figure 4. Responses to “What would have been the best age to start social media?” (%)



“A ban would have quite a lot of impact on me, because that would mean I couldn’t do many of the things I do now, like watching videos.”
(15-year-old boy, Netherlands).

Table 7. Age distribution of Responses to “What is the appropriate age to start using social media?” (%)

Age groups

	13 years old	14 years old	15 years old
Under 10	4%	0%	2%
10-11	21%	11%	6%
12-13	41%	43%	42%
14-15	16%	25%	31%
16+	12%	11%	13%
I don't know	6%	9%	5%

Those with a disability tend to choose older age categories as well (14-15 years old, and 16+), than those without. There is not much of a distinction between those with a mental health challenge and those without.

REASONING BEHIND PREFERRED AGE TO START SOCIAL MEDIA

The core reasons given as to why a particular age is considered suitable for starting social media use include perceived maturity, social inclusion, peer pressure, the transition to secondary school, the need to develop digital literacy, and the age at which the respondent personally began using social media. The reasons adolescents choose a preferred age range shift from practical considerations to concerns about protection and online risks, as described in table 8.

“It’s addictive, and when you’re 16, I think you can recognise the risks better.”

(14-year-old girl, Netherlands).

Table 8. Overview of the core reasons to choose preferred age to start social media

PREFERRED AGE CATEGORY	CORE REASONS IN ORDER OF PREVALENCE ²
Under 10	Sample size too small
10-11	• At this age, you have sufficient maturity and skills to understand social media • No particular reason / it feels right • In order to gain digital literacy • Because it is fun • To be in contact with friends and family • In preparation of starting secondary school • Due to my personal experience
12-13	• Because you start at secondary school • At this age, you have sufficient maturity and skills to understand social media • No particular reason / it feels right • Due to my personal experience • In order to gain digital literacy • To be in contact with friends and family • Because everyone around you has it • Because it is fun • Because it gives you access to information • It's not good for you if you start younger than this age
14-15	• At this age, you have sufficient maturity and skills to understand social media • No particular reason / it feels right • Because you are at secondary school • It's not good for you if you start younger than this age • Due to my personal experience
16+	• At this age, you have sufficient maturity and skills to understand social media • Social media can be dangerous • It's not good for you if you start younger than this age • No particular reason / it feels right

² # of mentions with a minimum of 4

How a social media age ban would affect adolescents

If a social media age ban were to be implemented, it would affect the respondents differently.

The majority (N=307) reported that such a ban would have a negative impact, describing it as “a pity,” “not fun,” or even “really awful.” The most frequently mentioned consequence was boredom, followed by feelings of sadness, loneliness, anger, depression, frustration, and stress. One respondent shared, *“I would be really angry because not everything is our fault,”* (13-year-old girl) highlighting a recurring sentiment that young people feel unfairly blamed or restricted.

A key concern was the potential loss of social contact, particularly with friends who live far away or with people they have connected with internationally. Others noted the impact on their media consumption, citing reduced access to information, entertainment (such as videos and games), inspiration, and even a sense of escape from reality. As one participant put it, *“Really not fun! I use it to stay in touch with friends!”* (13-year-old girl) while another noted, *“I would find that really unfortunate, because it’s an escape from reality for me”* (15-year-old girl).

While a smaller number (N=49) of respondents did mention potential positive effects, such as reduced distractions, a greater sense of calm, improved learning, increased self-confidence, and more time for offline activities, these benefits were typically described as only emerging after an initial period of frustration or adjustment. One respondent summarised this sentiment by saying,

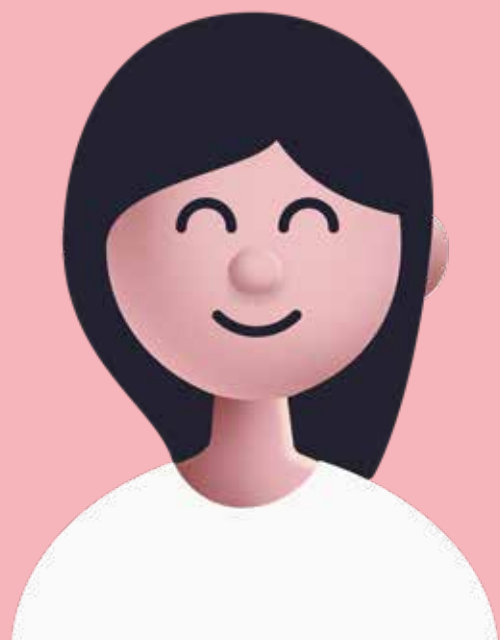
“At first, I’d be really upset, but after a while I think it would bring me peace”

(13-year-old girl, Netherlands).

Among all participants, 84 respondents stated that a social media ban would not affect them, while 16 indicated they would switch to alternative forms of digital communication, such as gaming or streaming platforms. However, one respondent noted that this shift might be less safe or user-friendly, saying, *“Everyone would just start chatting through games, so it wouldn’t really matter, but it would be less safe or easy”* (15-year-old boy). Additionally, 29 respondents said they would continue using social media regardless of a ban. Some stated they would do so in secret, by using their parents’ accounts or creating fake profiles.

“Everyone would just start chatting through games, so it wouldn’t really matter, but it would be less safe or easy”

(15-year-old boy, Netherlands).



PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS
OF A SOCIAL MEDIA BAN

Adolescents oppose the idea of a social media age ban and feel that the early to mid-teenage years are the most appropriate time to start using these platforms. However, if such a ban were implemented, we sought to understand whether they believed it would actually be effective, both in keeping them safe online and in terms of its feasibility among children their age.

When asked whether banning social media is an effective way to keep them safe online, **only 11% of respondents identified a complete ban as the most effective approach to ensuring online safety.** Most respondents think that a ban could help some, but not everyone (38%) and a slightly smaller group (35%) believe there are better ways to make social media safer without banning it. The findings are consistent across genders.

While overall skepticism is consistent, age shapes the specific concerns. Thirteen-year-olds are most concerned that a ban would push users to other

unsafe platforms (32%). Fourteen-year-olds show the most moderate and hesitant perspective, being the most likely to say the ban would only “help some, but not everyone” (46%) and the most likely to be not sure (21%). Finally, fifteen-year-olds have the strongest and most polarised views: they show the highest support for a ban as the best protective measure (16%) while also showing the highest response rate on the availability of better alternatives to make social media safer (39%).

The strongest difference in opinion regarding the ban’s effectiveness as a safety tool appears when comparing those who reported disability and/ or mental health challenges to those who did not. **Adolescents who reported having difficulty were nearly twice as likely (14%) to believe a total ban is the best way to protect you from harmful content, compared to those reporting no difficulty (8%).** Younger children without difficulty were more likely to believe a ban would only help some, but not everyone (43%) versus respondents that had reported difficulties (32%).

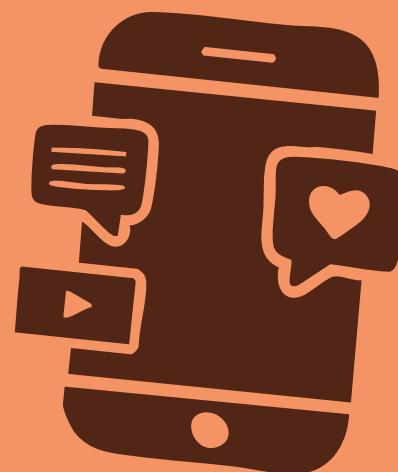
Table 9. Distribution of total responses to “Is an age ban on social media the most effective measure to ensure children’s safety online?” (%)

Yes, it’s the best way to protect me from harmful content.	11%
It could help some, but not everyone.	38%
It might make things worse by pushing people to other unsafe platforms.	28%
No, it takes away freedom from young people who use it responsibly.	27%
There are better ways to make social media safer without banning it.	35%
I’m not sure — I need more information.	17%
Other (please specify):	1%
None of these	3%

We asked not only whether a ban would help keep children safe online, but also whether they believed it would work in practice among their own age groups. **More than half of respondents (59%) stated that a social media age ban would not be enforceable for children their age**, grounding their answers in the following rationale:

“I’m often smarter than the system anyway”
(14-year-old boy, Netherlands).

- **Children cannot live without it;**
They are accustomed to social media platforms being an inherent part of their lives. They feel a strong need for it, with some describing it as an addiction.
- **Making it prohibited only makes it more attractive to children**
 (“forbidden makes it exciting”).
- **Children are smart and creative enough** to find ways around a ban.
- **Children argue that it is easy to bypass a ban**, for instance using VPN
- **Children would migrate to alternative platforms** where the ban is not enforced.
- **Children would fake their age** by entering a false date of birth when registering on a platform.
- **Children would use the account or device** (phone/laptop) of a parent or someone else who is already allowed on the platforms.
- **Children recognised the complexity** and near impossibility of implementing such a ban within the vastness of the online space, where there are no clear boundaries.



32% of respondents said that a ban’s enforceability could apply to some, but not to all. They emphasised that everyone is different and has different experiences and needs when it comes to being online. Many believe that those who truly want to access social media will always find a way to do so, suggesting that the effectiveness of a ban is highly questionable. In addition, some respondents mentioned that they currently use social media in a responsible or healthy way, and therefore feel unfairly disadvantaged by a ban.

“Not everyone is addicted to and dependent on social media, so you’re ruining it for everyone”
(14-year-old girl, Netherlands).



Adolescents generally perceive the potential age ban on social media as largely ineffective, both in terms of keeping children safe online and regarding its practical impact within their own age group.

Only 6% stated that a ban on social media would be an effective measure, arguing it would benefit all children. They believe it would create a safer environment, reduce the negative impact social media has on young users, and support healthier development. Some noted that children would begin to feel a sense of calm and would spend more time engaging in other meaningful activities. A few respondents mentioned that, if the ban were properly enforced, it would become difficult for children to bypass the ban. Two even suggested the introduction of a digital ID as a potential solution for stricter age verification.

There is no major distinction between gender categories. There is a slight difference, however, in age groups. 15-year-olds are more likely to argue it would work (8%), possibly reflecting greater exposure to or understanding of social media risks compared to their younger peers who were less likely to argue it would work (4% of 13-year-olds and 5% of 14-year-olds). Conversely, 13-year-olds are more likely to answer 'maybe' (37%), which might suggest greater uncertainty or ambivalence compared to 14-year-olds (28%) and 15-year-olds (31%). Notably, those with a disability and/or mental health challenge are more likely to argue 'maybe' and less likely to dismiss the idea outright, in comparison to those with no difficulty. Their hesitation might stem from a heightened awareness of the dual role social media plays for them: its potential benefits (such as distraction from stress and for learning, against heightened awareness of social media's potential harms.

Adolescents were also asked whether a ban would be appropriate in cases where social media platforms fail to meet strong safety standards, such as having effective reporting tools, better content filters, and less addictive design. In this context, 34% agreed that a ban should only be considered if platforms fail to protect young users and 39% said that a ban is never the right solution, regardless of platform performance. The findings are consistent across genders.

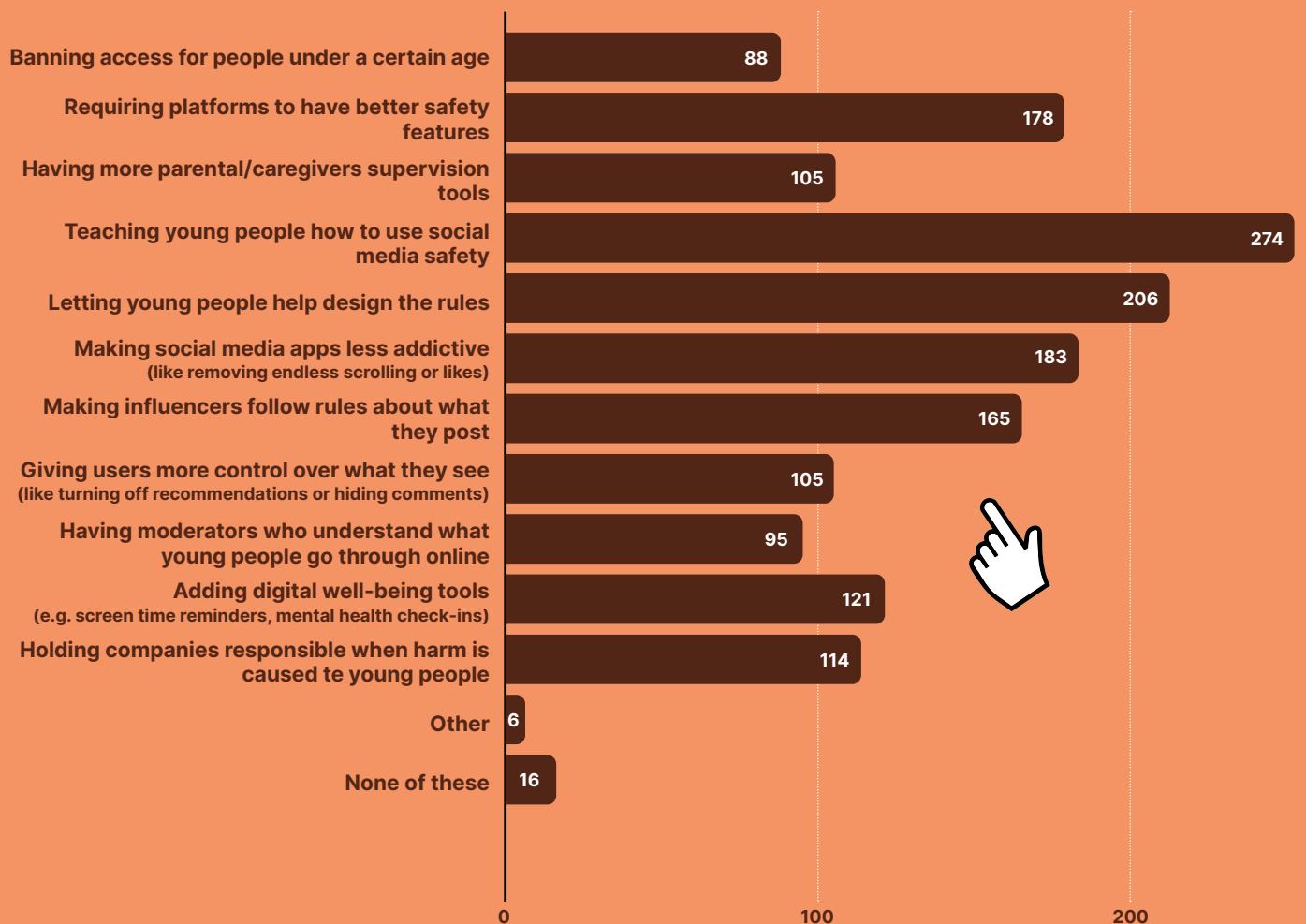
Differences emerge across age groups: 14-year-olds are slightly more inclined to argue that a ban should only be considered if platforms fail to protect young people, whereas 13- and 15-year-olds are more likely to believe that a ban is never appropriate. Differences are also observed between adolescents with and without a disability. Adolescents with a disability are somewhat more likely to respond that a ban should only happen if platforms fail to keep young people safe (39% vs. 30%) and that a ban should happen regardless of platform performance (12% vs. 6%).

IF BANNING SOCIAL MEDIA ISN'T THE ANSWER, WHAT IS?

Respondents were presented with a range of alternative tools aimed at keeping them safe online. More than half (55%) felt that educating young people on how to use social media safely is the most effective approach. This was followed by support for involving young people in designing the rules (41%), making social media apps less addictive (37%), and requiring platforms to implement stronger safety features (36%).

Responses showed no significant differences between girls and boys or across different age groups. However, there is a difference between those with a disability and/or mental health challenge and those without. Adolescents with a disability and/or mental health challenges were generally less likely to view certain safety measures as helpful. Both groups were less inclined to see *"Teaching young people how to use social media safely"* and *"Making influencers follow rules about what they post"* as effective solutions. In addition, those with a disability were less likely to support *"Making social media apps less addictive"* (e.g. by removing endless scrolling or likes), while those with mental health challenges were less likely to find *"Having moderators who understand what young people go through online"* helpful. Interestingly, adolescents with mental health challenges were more likely than their peers to see value in *"Letting young people help design the rules."*

Figure 5. The amount of responses per online safety measurement (N)



INCLUSION OF ADOLESCENTS IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The majority of respondents (73%) believe that children should be involved in the decision-making process regarding the safety of social media platforms. In comparison, only 8% said no, and 20% were unsure.

When asked how children should be included, respondents suggested a variety of forms of participation. Many highlighted the importance of gathering adolescents' opinions and experiences, as well as involving them in thinking along and proposing solutions. Suggested methods included surveys, questionnaires, and research, but also more interactive formats such as direct conversations, workshops, panels, focus groups, and youth commissions. These formats would allow children to engage with parents, experts, platform-designers and decision-makers in meaningful dialogue.

Respondents emphasised that participation should not be symbolic but genuinely involve listening to children and acting on their input. They argue that children are the primary users of social media, have first-hand experience with its risks, and therefore offer valuable insights into what changes could be effective. Moreover, involving them could lead to more relevant and practical solutions; they believe their input is essential for any solution to be truly effective.

“You want to impose the ban on them, so you should also ask for their opinion.”

(15-year-old boy, Netherlands).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The **Logged In, Left Out** study explored the perspectives of adolescents aged 13–15 in the Netherlands on age-based restrictions for social media use. A total of 501 adolescents completed a survey that captured their daily social media and phone habits, perceptions of online safety, opinions on a social media age ban and its potential impact, alternative measurements, and adolescents' involvement in related decision-making processes. The study contributes to a growing evidence base exploring the role of social media in the lives of children.

A majority of adolescents in this study use social media 1–5 hours daily, perceiving it as a space for connection, expression and wellbeing. Most adolescents felt safe online most of the time; however, feelings of unsafety arose from risks such as being contacted by strangers, encountering fake accounts, viewing upsetting content, and having personal information leaked. These findings are consistent with existing research, as most adolescents in this study did not view social media as inherently harmful, but rather as a space that offers entertainment, belonging and connection (Livingstone et al., 2017b).

Overall, most adolescents considered the early to mid-teenage years an appropriate age to start using social media with a majority stating 12–13 years as the preferred age range. More than half of the respondents opposed a social media age ban. Such a ban was seen as ineffective both in terms of enhancing online safety and in practice, given the ease

with which adolescents reported bypassing such restrictions. Respondents expressed that rather than feeling protected by a ban, they would feel excluded from valuable social interactions and opportunities online. Previous research similarly finds that restrictive or prohibition-based approaches often fail to prevent use and may instead push young people toward less regulated or hidden online spaces (Third et al., 2025).

When comparing alternative measures, most adolescents favoured approaches that focus on education, safer platform design, and less addictive apps. Crucially, they emphasised that children's meaningful participation is essential to creating safer online environments. They want to be listened to, to share their experiences, and to help shape the rules that affect their digital lives, seeing themselves not as passive users to be protected, but as active contributors whose perspectives are vital for developing effective and relevant safety solutions. These preferences reflect those in empowerment and collaboration rather than restriction.

The findings make clear that age alone does not determine how safe or unsafe children feel online. Instead, adolescents' experiences are shaped by a combination of intersecting factors, including gender, mental health and disability. While many respondents in this study described feeling confident when using social media, others expressed heightened worry, discomfort, or exposure to risk.

Recognising this diversity is essential: online safety strategies must be flexible and inclusive if they are to reach those most affected.

This aligns with research showing that online vulnerability is patterned by overlapping identity and structural inequalities, calling for explicitly intersectional approaches to digital safety (Stoilova et al., 2021; Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2026).

As an exploratory study, these findings offer valuable insights into adolescents' views and priorities but do not claim to capture the full range of their experiences. To understand these perspectives more thoroughly, especially across different groups, genders, and social and cultural contexts in the Netherlands, further research is needed.

Future studies should explore how various groups of children experience online risks of social media and opportunities, and how participation mechanisms can be made genuinely inclusive and effective.

Given the findings of the research and the children's point of view, it appears that age-based restrictions for social media use would overlook the complexity of children's digital lives and would fail to effectively protect them. Children's needs in online spaces cannot be addressed through one-size-fits-all measures. Therefore, this study formulated several recommendations to ensure effective, child-centered and evidence-based online safety measures.

Recommendations

• PROMOTE DIGITAL LITERACY AND EDUCATION

Do not ban children from social media, equip them. Provide inclusive and age-appropriate education that empowers children to stay safe and thrive in online spaces. Digital resilience and media literacy should be addressed coherently and in an integrated manner as mandatory components of the school curricula.

• DESIGN SAFER AND LESS ADDICTIVE ONLINE PLATFORMS

Ensure that social media platforms incorporate Safety by Design measures, including privacy-by-default, limited data collection, and a proactive avoidance of features known to harm children's mental health or expose them to risks. Furthermore, before any new digital service or significant feature impacting children is launched, platforms must be required to conduct thorough and independent Child Rights Impact Assessments, ensuring that the rights and needs of children are prioritised in platform design.

• ENSURE MEANINGFUL CHILD PARTICIPATION IN POLICYMAKING

Establish inclusive and structured child participation mechanisms to ensure that all children have a voice in the policies that directly affect them and to bridge the gap between them and policymakers.

• ADOPT INTERSECTIONAL AND CONTEXT-SPECIFIC APPROACHES TO ONLINE SAFETY

Acknowledge that children's experiences and views on digital safety and exclusion vary according to intersecting identities and contexts. Apply an intersectional and context-specific approach at every stage of online safety measures, from the design and implementation of social media platforms to youth participation mechanisms in decision-making processes.

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