

Protecting Children from Social Media

Are Bans Effective?

15 years

14 years

13 years



Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies - Beirut



SMEX
Advancing Digital Rights

This report was prepared by SMEX in collaboration with The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies - Beirut.

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Advancing Digital Rights

SMEX is a non-profit organization dedicated to defending and advancing human rights in digital spaces across West Asia and North Africa region. Its work focuses on strengthening digital privacy protections and expanding access to digital security tools and practices across the region.

The organization works to equip individuals and communities with the knowledge and tools they need to protect their privacy online, with a particular focus on digital security training and capacity building.

At the same time, it advocates for stronger legal and policy frameworks that safeguard privacy as a fundamental right.

Through collaboration with technology developers and other partners, the organization promotes access to secure, rights-respecting tools, particularly for communities and individuals facing heightened risks.

Its research and awareness-raising activities shed light on the risks posed by inadequate privacy protections, while supporting communities to adopt safer digital practices and advocate for stronger safeguards. At the heart of its mission is a commitment to ensuring that privacy remains central to its work.

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Executive Summary

Arab governments are increasingly considering social media bans and age-verification measures to protect children online. These initiatives are mostly influenced by international legislative trends, particularly in Europe and Australia, and are driven by reasonable concerns about children's exposure to online exploitation, cyberbullying, dangerous content, excessive platform use, and the wider impact of digital technologies on their well-being.

This paper reframes the debate between unrestricted access and a ban; it proposes to address the issue from several perspectives, including the digital infrastructure our children interact with and adopt a shared-responsibility model that distributes responsibility among governments, technology companies, schools, parents, and children themselves. The paper also identifies technology companies as key actors whose responsibilities have received insufficient attention. The paper calls therefore for stronger platform accountability, child safety by design (Safety by Design), solid privacy and data protection laws, digital and media literacy, parental support, effective child protection mechanisms, and meaningful participation of children and young people in decisions affecting their digital lives.

Some meaningful policy and process actions are required to reach that point, as this paper recognizes to address these concerns. However, a broad social media ban and mandatory age-verification systems are not the best solutions to the existing, complex problems. These restrictions lack effectiveness, proportionality, and sustainable response. They leave many of the structural drivers of online harm unaddressed and under-researched, including algorithmic amplification, persuasive platform design, extensive collection of children's personal data, weak platform accountability, insufficient investment in digital literacy, limited parental knowledge, and child protection systems.

These policy discussions in the region are influenced by legislative models developed in countries with stronger legal safeguards, independent oversight institutions, and more comprehensive data protection frameworks. Simply importing such approaches without adapting them to local realities may create new privacy, security, and human rights risks while failing to achieve their intended child protection objectives.

The paper is grounded in the conviction that protecting children online and protecting their rights are complementary goals. Policies governing this field should be evidence-based, aligned with international human rights standards, and adapted to the legal, institutional, and social realities of Lebanon and other countries in the region. The aim should not be to exclude children from the digital world, but rather to build a safer, more transparent, and more accountable digital ecosystem in which children can safely learn, participate, express themselves, and thrive.

Similar policy discussions have begun to emerge across the region, influenced by international regulatory trends and growing public concern over children's online safety.

Introduction

On the global level, governments are actively seeking age-based restrictions and social media bans to protect children from online harms. Proponents of these measures argue that imposing social media bans will protect children from harmful content, harassment, and cyberbullying, thereby reducing the digital risks they face.

Similar policy discussions have begun to emerge across the region, influenced by international regulatory trends and public concerns about children's online safety.

This debate over social media bans versus unrestricted access addresses only a fraction of the risks children face in the digital space. This paper seeks to shed light on the complexity and multiple dimensions of this issue and to underscore the need for an approach beyond this binary framing. The questions we ask are not whether children should be allowed or prohibited from using social media, but how societies can best protect children while protecting their rights. Children also benefit from digital connectivity in many ways, including access to information, education, social connection, and civic participation.

"Children also benefit from digital connectivity in many ways".

Therefore, we need to address the interconnected digital spaces in which children interact and where potential harm may arise, as well as the ways in which physical spaces shape what happens online. We also need to address the shared responsibilities of all stakeholders, including governments, technology companies, parents, children, and educational institutions.

This paper examines whether broad social media bans and age-verification measures are

evidence-based and proportionate responses to the challenges they seek to address. It proposes a broader approach that focuses on some pillars, including platform accountability, child safety by design, digital knowledge, privacy, and children's rights. The paper proceeds from the need to take into account the diverse legal, institutional, and social contexts across Arab countries. It concludes that effective policies for children's online safety should strengthen the digital ecosystem rather than simply restrict children's access to it.

Background and Context

Challenges Facing Policy Makers

Social media bans are part of a growing movement restricting young people's access to various parts of the internet. A major development in this direction was the UK's Online Safety Act, which established broad obligations for online platforms to prevent children from accessing certain types of content and services. Similar approaches and regulations are emerging rapidly around the world, including in some Arab countries, often drawing on existing regulatory models. Outright bans represent a more restrictive form of age verification. Taken together, these approaches are also known as age-gating due to the technical methods used to enforce them.

In some cases, governments approve specific verification methods, while implementation is largely carried out by private third-party companies.

Many verification methods require users to provide biometric data or government-issued identification to these companies. Such approaches raise privacy and data protection concerns, particularly in countries across the region where data protection frameworks and independent oversight remain limited.

The collection, storage, and processing of sensitive personal information create additional risks

of data breaches, surveillance, misuse of personal data, and identity theft. Information collected for age verification may also subsequently be used for other purposes. As a result, measures intended to protect children online may inadvertently expose both children and adults to new privacy and security harms while increasing the volume of personal data held by governments and private actors.

This global trend raises key questions for countries across the Arab region, particularly regarding the assumption that regulation alone can address the various challenges associated with the online environment. Many of the age-verification approaches currently being proposed are drawn from regulatory models developed in Western contexts with legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and data protection safeguards that are not available in many countries.

Policymakers should therefore carefully assess whether such measures are appropriate to local realities rather than assuming that regulatory solutions developed elsewhere can be readily adopted. The risks associated with age verification may be amplified where privacy protections are weak, oversight institutions are under-resourced, and mechanisms for accountability are limited.

Governments across the region are considering social media bans and age-based restrictions in response to growing concerns over children's online safety. These discussions are influenced by

"The risks associated with age verification may be amplified".

legislative developments in Europe and elsewhere around the world, where governments are pursuing stronger regulation in response to online harms affecting children.

However, the regulatory proposals dominating this debate remain largely reactive. A wide range of stakeholders—including policymakers, parents, educators, and child protection advocates—have

raised concerns about children's exposure to online harms, including sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, sextortion, age-inappropriate content, algorithmic amplification of self-harm or violent content, excessive engagement with digital services, and the broader impact of social media on children's well-being. Platform design features, including recommendation algorithms, infinite scrolling, autoplay, and intrusive notifications, have also come under increasing scrutiny for their potential impact on children's online experiences.

As children spend more time in digital environments, concerns over their online safety have intensified, contributing to growing calls for stronger government intervention. Social media bans and age-based restrictions are increasingly being presented as policy tools to reduce children's exposure to online risks and enhance their safety.

At the same time, children's digital lives are becoming increasingly diverse and interconnected. Social media represents only one part of a broader digital ecosystem that includes messaging applications, gaming platforms, AI chatbots, search engines, video-sharing platforms, and educational technologies. This interconnected digital environment raises an important policy question: should child online safety be addressed by restricting access to social media as a single category of digital service while overlooking the broader digital environment in which children participate?

There is no simple answer to this question, and regulatory measures alone cannot provide a comprehensive solution. Addressing it requires assessing the available evidence on children's online experiences and the effectiveness of social media bans and age-based restrictions, while also considering the broader responsibilities of governments, technology companies, schools, parents, and society in protecting children from online harm while safeguarding their rights.

"Regulatory measures alone cannot provide a comprehensive solution".

Evidence and Analysis

The available evidence does not support the simple conclusion that social media is inherently harmful to children and adolescents, nor does it suggest that restricting access alone can effectively address the risks policymakers seek to mitigate. Instead, three key findings consistently emerge from the research.

First, young people vary considerably in how they use social media. Young people are not a homogeneous group, and their online experiences differ. Some forms of social media use can support healthy development by facilitating learning, creativity, social connection, and access to information, while others may cause harm. As the American Psychological Association (APA) notes, "using social media is not inherently beneficial or harmful to young people."⁽¹⁾ Its effects depend on a set of factors, including how children use these platforms, the content they encounter, their individual strengths and vulnerabilities, and the family and social environments in which they grow up. This suggests that blanket policy responses may overlook important differences in children's experiences and needs.

Second, research has highlighted biological and psychological capacities and vulnerabilities that shape how young people interact with the content, functions, and features built into social media platforms. These aspects of young people's social media experience must be addressed to mitigate risks. Social media use, functionality, and consent mechanisms should be tailored to young people's developmental capacities. Design features created for adults may not be appropriate for children. This shifts the policy discussion from simply limiting access to ensuring that platforms are designed with children's safety and development in mind.

Third, young people are adept at circumventing age restrictions. Substantial evidence shows that a significant number of children aged 12 and younger routinely use social media, indicating that current

policies and practices aimed at restricting access to older age groups are not effective.

Protecting young people online therefore requires a flexible approach that allows access while ensuring effective child safety. Such an approach should combine platform accountability, child safety by design, stronger privacy protections, digital literacy, parental support, and evidence-based regulation that is adequate to children's diverse experiences and developmental needs.

Human Rights and Legal Considerations

Social media bans raise human rights concerns. While states have a legitimate obligation to take measures to protect children's well-being, such measures must also comply with international human rights standards. Safeguarding children in digital environments should be approached holistically, integrating child protection with the fulfillment of children's broader rights.

First, age-gating measures and social media bans affect not only children but also adults as well. These systems are designed to verify the age of all users, resulting in the collection and potential exposure of personal information by third-party providers, which are generally not required to provide mechanisms for appealing failed age-verification checks. Such measures can infringe on the rights to privacy and freedom of expression, while discouraging access to lawful content due to concerns about identification and surveillance.

Second, children are rights-holder in their own right. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) makes clear that children are not merely subjects of protection, but also holders of fundamental rights. Article 13 of the CRC protects children's right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas. Article 16 protects children from arbitrary

(1) American Psychological Association, "Potential Risks of Content, Features, and Functions: A Closer Look at the Science Behind How Social Media Affects Youth," April 2024, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2Tad>

or unlawful interference with their privacy, while Article 12 guarantees children capable of forming their own views the right to express those views freely in matters affecting them⁽²⁾.

"Children are not merely subjects of protection, but also holders of fundamental rights".

These rights do not preclude states from regulating children's access to harmful content or requiring platforms to adopt stronger safety measures. However, any restriction must be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and designed to serve a legitimate aim. Broad bans that limit children's participation in online spaces may interfere with access to information and education, as well as opportunities for social connection, cultural participation, and civic engagement. They may also reduce children's ability to seek help, access support communities, or participate in public debate.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has affirmed that children's rights apply in digital environments and that states should ensure children can participate in these spaces safely.

Freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information need to be taken into account when trying to balance the need to protect children from harm with the obligation to uphold their rights.

Within this context, many Arab countries lack robust data protection laws and effective oversight mechanisms. Imposing age-verification systems may therefore increase the risk of expanded surveillance, data breaches, and the exclusion of marginalized users.

Social media bans should not be treated as a straightforward child protection measure. Governments should reassess whether such measures are evidence-based and proportionate to the risks they seek to address. Instead, policy makers

should prioritize some key areas such as platform accountability, privacy, safety, digital skills, effective child protection systems, and the meaningful participation of children and young people in decisions that affect their lives online.

Assessment of Policy Options

This debate is often framed in binary terms, with policy makers rarely considering broader approaches. It would be more useful to compare different policy options based on their effectiveness, their ability to address a specific problem, their proportionality, their sustainability, and their suitability to the regional context, while continuing to support research in this area.

Policy makers seek to demonstrate that they are taking action to reduce harm. Banning social media appears to be a quick measure that achieves this impression without actually addressing the problem. Such bans are difficult to enforce and may drive children toward unregulated platforms and AI software, potentially increasing the scale of harm.

Applying a ban on social media may restrict children's access to some important content and networks, such as: educational materials, news, social connections, and support communities. Most importantly, bans do not address the structural causes of harm, including platform design, weak content oversight, algorithmic amplification, data exploitation, or non-digital factors that drive bullying and abuse.

The following are some policy-related suggestions to reduce the harm inflicted on children and youth:

- **Stronger privacy regulations:** Age verification is presented as a technical tool necessary to enforce bans; however, it creates major privacy and security risks. Strengthening privacy laws to provide specific protection for children's data is a

(2) United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," Resolution 44/25, 20 November 1989, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2Soh>

more structural response. It directly addresses how platforms collect, process, retain, and monetize children's data. This can include data minimization, restrictions on targeted advertising to children, privacy-by-default settings, and stronger enforcement against misuse of personal data.

- **Platform accountability:** This approach requires companies to redesign services to reduce risks to children. This includes safer default settings, restrictions on addictive design features, greater transparency in recommender systems, stronger reporting mechanisms, improved content moderation, child rights impact assessments, and independent audits.

This approach directly targets the systems that create or amplify harm. It also shifts responsibility from children and parents alone to the companies that design and profit from these services. The main challenge lies in enforcement, especially in countries with limited leverage over global technology companies, as is the case across the region.

- **Digital education programs** are important in helping children understand online risks, from harassment to manipulation, as well as existing reporting mechanisms and ways to participate safely online. This approach empowers children rather than simply excluding them from digital spaces.

The limitation of this approach is that education alone cannot address harms driven by platform design and practices. Digital and media literacy should therefore complement, rather than replace, platform accountability and child protection systems.

- **Parents** also need practical tools and guidance to support children online. Public education campaigns can help parents better understand platform risks, privacy settings, reporting mechanisms, screen-time management, and how to respond to online harm. Parents play an important but are often expected to supervise their children's online activities without adequate knowledge or resources. However, parental responsibility should not be treated as a substitute

for regulating platforms or strengthening public institutions.

- **Enhancing legal accountability and protection:** Governments should strengthen penalties on adults who exploit, sexually harass, and blackmail children online. Legal reform should also be accompanied by survivor-centered reporting mechanisms, trained law enforcement personnel, child protection services, and safeguards against the misuse of cybercrime laws to criminalize speech or target marginalized groups.

- **Enhancing in-platform protection tools:** Platforms should provide stronger tools for children and young people facing harms arising from the use of their services, including harassment and blackmail. These tools should encompass accessible reporting mechanisms, rapid response procedure, evidence preservation, blocking and muting features, escalation channels, and access to support resources.

This approach offers practical and direct support to victims, particularly given that existing protections are often inconsistent, poorly enforced, or unavailable in Arabic or other local languages and can provide direct support to potential victims. Governments should therefore require platforms to meet minimum protection standards and ensure transparency regarding their implementation.

Overall, there is no silver-bullet solution to such a complex and constantly evolving issue, nor can any single policy option address the full range of risks children face online. Social media bans and age-verification may appear straightforward, but they raise serious concerns regarding children's rights. A more effective approach would combine stronger privacy protections, platform accountability, safety-by-design obligations, digital and media literacy, parental support, research, and stronger remedies against online abuse.

The priority for the region should be to build a child online safety framework that protects children without normalizing surveillance or restricting their rights to freedom of expression, access to information, privacy, participation, and development.

Western regulations, along with their judicial and institutional practices, differ in context from those of the Arab region. In countries such as the UAE or Qatar, where bans are being considered or implemented, the lack of independent oversight and weak Personal Data Protection Laws (PDPLs) mean that the very measures intended to "protect" children may expose them to greater privacy and security risks. Furthermore, in contexts where surveillance has become normalized, educating children about privacy and security provides a more effective long-term safeguard than excluding them from digital spaces.

The Arab region has specific characteristics that are not adequately reflected in Western debates, such as weaker data protection laws, limited regulatory capacity, political instability and conflict, uneven digital knowledge, lower availability of child mental health services, and the widespread use of shared devices and family accounts. This helps explain why simply importing policy solutions developed elsewhere may not produce the same outcomes in Arab countries.

Beyond Bans: Toward Digital Policies that Protect Children and Their Rights

This paper recognizes that concerns about children's online safety are real and warrant serious policy attention. We are navigating a complex digital environment that can be difficult for parents, educators, policymakers, and children to understand. While governments have a legitimate role in protecting children from online harm, they need to acknowledge the complexity of the issue and engage with a range of stakeholders to identify effective ways to mitigate these risks.

The paper does not consider a social media ban and mandatory age-verification systems to be solutions to this complex issue, nor does it view them as proportionate responses. Some of these

measures restrict children's opportunities to interact, make mistakes, learn, and mature. They may also undermine fundamental rights including privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information while failing to address many of the underlying causes of online harm, such as platform design, algorithmic amplification, weak transparency, and data exploitation.

The paper advocates an evidence-based, rights-based approach that distributes responsibility among different stakeholders, particularly technology companies, governments, schools, parents, and children themselves. This approach seeks to strengthen platform accountability, promote child safety by design, ensure robust privacy and data protection laws, enhance digital and media literacy, parental support, and effective child protection mechanisms.

Policy solutions should reflect local realities for the Arab region. Rather than simply replicating approaches developed elsewhere, Solutions to protect children online should be carefully tailored to these realities. This requires building a safer, more accountable digital ecosystem that protects children while safeguarding their rights.

Lebanon: Domestic Context and Alternatives to Bans

Rather than resorting to blanket bans or age-verification measures, which have proven to be of limited effectiveness and raise concerns over privacy violations, Lebanon should adopt a consultative, rights-based approach grounded in empowering children and youth by fostering digital and media literacy from an early age.

Children's safety remains the top priority, alongside ensuring they benefit from digital technologies. Achieving this does not require the outright ban proposed by certain members of the Lebanese Parliament, but rather a focus on mitigating the risks faced by children and adolescents. These

risks are compounded in countries suffering from weak enforcement of data protection laws and limited oversight, as is the case in Lebanon.

Lebanon currently lacks a standalone privacy law, while its existing legal framework is confined to outdated and inadequately enforced legislation, such as Law No. 81/2018 on Electronic Transactions and Personal Data. Furthermore, Lebanon faces challenges in ensuring effective, independent oversight and enforcing accountability frameworks, both essential components for the safe implementation of restrictive digital policies.

Restricting the response to age-based bans, for instance, could lead to privacy violations, heightened surveillance, data breaches, identity theft, and the misuse of personal information, as international experience has shown. Moreover, bans fail to address cyberbullying, harmful content, and dangerous interactions with adults, and risk undermining media literacy among children and adolescents, while reducing opportunities for social interaction and limiting access to information. Bans may also drive children and young people toward other digital tools beyond social media, including certain games and

artificial intelligence applications, among others. Framing the debate solely around social media bans overlooks the interconnected nature of the digital environment, which encompasses online games, search engines, and artificial intelligence applications. It may also distract attention from holding technology companies accountable for business models built on the algorithmic exploitation of attention.

Given Lebanon's inability to impose direct sanctions on major technology companies, it becomes essential to adopt a consultative, rights-based approach founded primarily on enhancing coordination among ministries and government agencies, educational institutions, regulatory bodies, representative councils, security and human rights actors, as well as parents and children themselves. Within this framework, public policy in Lebanon could move toward enacting strong data protection and privacy legislation that ensures the safety of children and youth is taken into account from the product design stage, while involving them in formulating policies that affect their digital lives. This would reduce reliance on restrictive measures that may fail to address the root causes of these risks.

Conclusion

The paper addresses a complex issue that requires multifaceted alternatives. We need to look more broadly at the digital infrastructure across the different spaces where children interact and learn, in order to identify potential threats and find ways to mitigate the associated risks.

Broad social media bans and mandatory age-verification measures offer an overly simplistic response to these complex problems. Such measures do not address most of the underlying causes of online harm, and may put privacy, access to information, and children's rights at risk.

A long-term approach is the most effective way to enhance children's safety in the digital space, by distributing responsibilities across governments, technology companies, schools, and parents, and children themselves.

Children's online safety policies should be evidence-based, supported by data, and grounded in international human rights standards, while also being adapted to local realities. The focus should be on building a safer, more transparent, and more accountable digital ecosystem that protects children online without compromising their rights.

"Building a safer, more transparent, and more accountable digital ecosystem".

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