

**THIS SESSION WILL  
COMMENCE AT 9:00AM**

# CAREER PRACTITIONERS SEMINAR

Friday 5 June 2026

Have a question?  
Ask us!



# CAREER PRACTITIONERS SEMINAR

Julie Baxter  
Senior Manager, Domestic Student Recruitment



**MONASH UNIVERSITY** recognises that its Australian campuses are located on the unceded lands of the people of the Kulin nations, and pays its respects to their Elders, past and present.



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# PROGRAM

TIME	ACTIVITY
9:00 - 9:10AM	<b>Welcome (hybrid)</b> <i>Julie Baxter, Senior Manager, Domestic Student Recruitment</i>
9:10 - 10:00AM	<b>Keynote address: Youth, Social Media and the Ban — What Career Practitioners Need to Know (hybrid)</b> <i>Brady Robards</i> <i>Associate Professor of Sociology at Monash University and Associate Dean (Research), Faculty of Arts</i>
10:00 - 10:50AM	<b>Admissions Update (hybrid)</b> <i>James Marshall, Director, Admissions</i>
10:50 - 11:20AM	<b>Morning tea and expo session (in-person only)</b> <i>Faculty representatives</i>
11:30 - 12:15PM	<b>Faculty workshop 1 (in-person only)</b>
12:25 - 1:10PM	<b>Faculty workshop 1 (in-person only)</b>
1:20 - 2:15PM	<b>Lunch (in-person only)</b>

# UPCOMING CAREER PRACTITIONER EVENT

## VTAC Briefing

Hear the latest updates from VTAC and Monash in the lead up to applications opening up for the 2026-27 intake cycle.

- **Date:** Friday 26 June 2026
- **Time:** 10 am - 1 pm (including lunch)
- **Location:** Monash University, Peninsula campus
- **Presenters:**
  - Michael Ciesielski , VTAC
  - James Marshall, Director of Admissions, Monash University



# UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE

## **Discover Monash**

We have a great range of opportunities for your young people to engage with Monash.

Visit our Discover Monash website and feel free to share it with your families and students.

It also includes Open Day details!



# YOUTH, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE BAN

## WHAT CAREER PRACTITIONERS NEED TO KNOW

**Brady Robards**, Associate Professor of Sociology at Monash University  
and Associate Dean (Research), Faculty of Arts

## ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR BRADY ROBARDS

- Specialist in youth and digital cultures, with research spanning young people's privacy practices, social media in queer communities, digital media and alcohol consumption, youth engagement with public services, and how social media shapes employment and professional identity.
- Supports early career researchers, oversees internal funding, leads research impact initiatives, and fosters collaborative, programmatic research. Co-Convenes the Monash Digital Cultures Research Group and serves on the Editorial Boards of the Journal of Youth Studies, Journal of Applied Youth Studies, and Social Science Computer Review.
- ARC DECRA Senior Research Fellow (2019–2022) and supervises Masters and PhD projects on youth, digital cultures, identity, and qualitative digital methods.



**Brady Robards**  
**Associate Professor of Sociology**  
**Associate Dean (Research),**  
**Faculty of Arts, Monash University**

# Setting the scene: The bad and the good of social media

- ❖ The context: significant concern around the impact of social media on young people
  - Body image and mental health
  - Bullying and interpersonal conflicts
  - Predators, scammers, deepfakes
  - Privacy - peers, family, teachers, future employers?
- ❖ There are also positives:
  - Social connection, community, exploring aspects of self, leisure
  - Learning, civic participation and news (global citizenship)
  - Developing digital literacies for
- ❖ *Why does this matter for career practitioners?*
- ❖ **Overall question:** How do we support young people to navigate social media in ways that recognise their own agency, skills, and strategies, in a fast-moving context?



# Why the ban?

- 'World first social media age restrictions', introduced 10 Dec 2025
- Currently includes Facebook, Instagram, Threads, Snapchat, X/Twitter, TikTok, Twitch, YouTube, Kick and Reddit
- 'aim to protect young Australians from pressures and risks that users can be exposed to while logged in to social media accounts. These come from design features that encourage them to spend more time on screens, while also serving up content that can harm their health and wellbeing' (eSafety)



PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA  
The Hon Anthony Albanese MP

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Home / Media / Albanese Government protecting kids from social media harms

## Albanese Government protecting kids from social media harms

Media release  
Wednesday 30 July 2025

The Hon Anthony Albanese MP Prime Minister of Australia  
The Hon Anika Wells MP Minister for Communications

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The Albanese Labor Government is backing Australian families, parents and kids by announcing today YouTube will be included in its world-leading under-16 social media laws.

Delaying access to social media, including YouTube, until the age of 16 will protect young Australians at a critical stage of their development, giving them three more years to build real world connections and online resilience.

Following extensive consultation and advice, age-restricted social media platforms will face fines of up to \$49.5 million for failing to take responsible steps to prevent underage account holders onto their services.

Age-restricted social media platforms will include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X and YouTube, amongst other platforms.

Informed by advice from the eSafety Commissioner, the Online Safety (Age-Restricted Social Media Platforms) Rules 2025 tabled today specify which types of online services will not be captured by the social media legislation, including online gaming, messaging apps, health and education services.

These types of online services have been excluded from the new minimum age obligations because they

# How is the ban going?

For Adyan, 14, life has not changed too much.

"I thought the ban would be, like, way more strict, but it ended up being really, like, chill, like, nothing happened," he said. "It's completely useless."

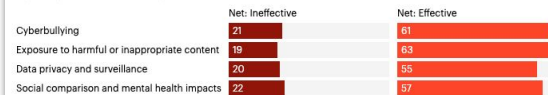
"Probably around 10% [of friends] actually have been banned, and half of that 10 per cent has been unbanned by... [using] other people's faces, use their driver's licence."



"I didn't get any warning on anything. When I first made my social media accounts, I had already set my birthday before the year I was born. So I was born in 2010, I think I had set it to like 2007," said Evie, a 15-year-old from Adelaide.

## Most Australians believe the ban is proving effective in controlling the risks children face online

Now that the under-16 social media ban has gone into effect, how effective do you think the ban will be in positively improving these areas? (% of respondents)



YouGov

YouGov Surveys, January 12 and 14, 2026

## Parents report behavioural shifts, both positive and negative

Among parents of children aged 16 and under, 61% observed between two and four positive behavioural changes following the ban. Reported improvements include:

- **43%** noticed more in-person social interactions
- **38%** said their children are more present and engaged during interactions
- **38%** reported improved parent-child relationships

However, the gains are not universal. Two in five parents observed between two and four negative impacts, including:


- **27%** reporting increased digital inequality or unequal access
- **27%** noting a shift to alternative or less regulated platforms
- **25%** observing reduced social connection, creativity, or peer support online

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Social media ban This article is more than 1 month old

## Fifteen-year-old Noah hasn't been kicked off any social media platforms - he's still fighting Australia's under-16 ban in court



Josh Taylor Technology reporter  
Sat 11 Apr 2026 01:00 AEST

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Since Australia's under-16s social media ban began four months ago, Noah Jones's online experience has been "pretty much the same".  
The 15-year-old Sydney resident says he hasn't been kicked off any social media platform since the policy came into effect late last year.

"The case is being fought on the grounds that Australians have a constitutional implied right to freedom of political communication, and the ban will prevent teens under 16 from engaging in political communication on social media platforms."

"Two-thirds of teenagers are still on social media platforms included in the ban, according to the eSafety commissioner"

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Social media ban This article is more than 1 month old

## Analysis Australia wants to sell its social media ban to the world - but are the measures even working?


Josh Taylor

Two-thirds of teenagers are still on social media platforms included in the ban, according to the eSafety commissioner

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Wed 1 Apr 2026 11:12 AEST

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Since Australia's social media ban, under-16s who have managed to bypass age checks are no longer given the bare minimum of safety features the platforms have included for teenagers.  
Photograph: Stock/News/Getty Images

When the age assurance technology trial released its final report before Australia's under-16s social media ban came into effect last year, its first finding was: age assurance can be done privately, efficiently and effectively.

Four months since the ban came into effect, we can say that was - to paraphrase Yes Minister - a courageous statement.

The country's eSafety commissioner revealed on Tuesday that more than two-thirds of teens were still on the platforms included in the ban, children were easily bypassing facial age estimation technology if aged within two years of 16, and half of the platforms initially included in the ban were being assessed for non-compliance.

eSafety also found 66% of parents whose children remained on social media said that the platforms had not asked their child to go through age verification, while others reported that if the age on an account was said to

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Manila 23.9°C 02:48 PM June 2, 2026

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World

### Malaysia enforces ban on social media accounts for children younger than 16

By The Associated Press  
Published Jun 1, 2026 12:16 pm



A view of the TikTok app logo, in Tokyo, Japan, Sept. 28, 2020. (AP Photo/Kichiro Sato, File)

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysia on Monday began enforcing rules barring millions of children younger than 16 from owning social media accounts, joining a global effort to tighten online safety protections for young users.

The rules require social media platforms to implement age-verification systems and block users under 16 from creating accounts. They apply to platforms with at least 8 million users, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.

Manila Bulletin, June 1, 2026

## Where else is following Australia's lead?

- **Malaysia's** ban started this week
- **Indonesia** started from March 28 (under 13 banned, 13-16 with parental consent)
- **Greece and Turkey:** Scheduled to ban social media access for children under 15.
- **Other Countries:** Several nations are currently drafting or advancing legislation to ban or highly restrict social media for children under the ages of 14 or 15, including Austria, Denmark, Malaysia, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain

# Australia's teen social media ban is a flop. But there's no joy in 'I told you so'

Samantha Floreani



Around seven in 10 children remain on major platforms. Who could possibly have predicted that this wasn't going to work? Well, lots of people

"The fallback argument for the social media ban is that it's better than nothing. But with results like these, it may be worse than nothing, given it potentially creates new problems. Children will remain online with arguably less supervision and support, new privacy and digital security vulnerabilities seem to have appeared and the worst aspects of social media lay largely unaddressed."

"Ultimately, the fundamental problem with age-gating is that it fails to address any of the root problems with our current online landscape - that is, the extractive business models and pernicious design features of mainstream tech companies."

# The risks of the ban

- Too soon to see evidence of impact of the ban, but so far efficacy 'mixed', however...
- Closing down opportunities for the positives (social connection, learning, belonging) especially for marginalised young people (LGBTQIA+, regional/rural, people with disabilities, etc.)
- Driving young people to unregulated spaces
- Closing down opportunities for young people to seek help when things do go wrong
- False sense of security for parents and guardians
- Taking pressure off platforms to do better: exploitative algorithms, extractive business models, harmful content...



The image shows a screenshot of a BBC News article. At the top, the BBC logo is visible. Below it, a navigation bar includes links for Home, News, Football 2026, Business, Technology, Health, Culture, Arts, Travel, Earth, Sport, Audio, Video, and Live. The main headline reads "Social media ban 'won't keep children safe', commissioner warns". Below the headline, it says "4 days ago" and provides options to "Share", "Save", and "Add as preferred on Google". The article features a photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone displaying a "Social Media" app with icons for Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and others. Below the photo, there is a sub-headline: "There have been calls for greater focus on the practices of social media companies". The main text of the article states: "There is insufficient evidence to suggest a social media ban for under-16s would help keep children safer online, Scotland's children's commissioner has said. Nicola Killean warned a ban could drive children to less regulated or riskier parts of the internet, and said the focus should instead be on holding social media companies to account. She was responding to the UK government's consultation on whether to introduce a minimum age for accessing online platforms, including social media. 'A ban does little to address underlying issues such as exploitative algorithms, and business models that drive harmful content and engagement,' she said."

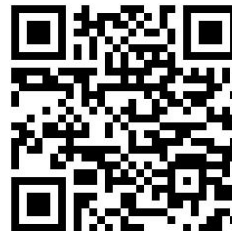
# The Social Media & Employment Project

'The impact of social media on the employment prospects of young Australians'

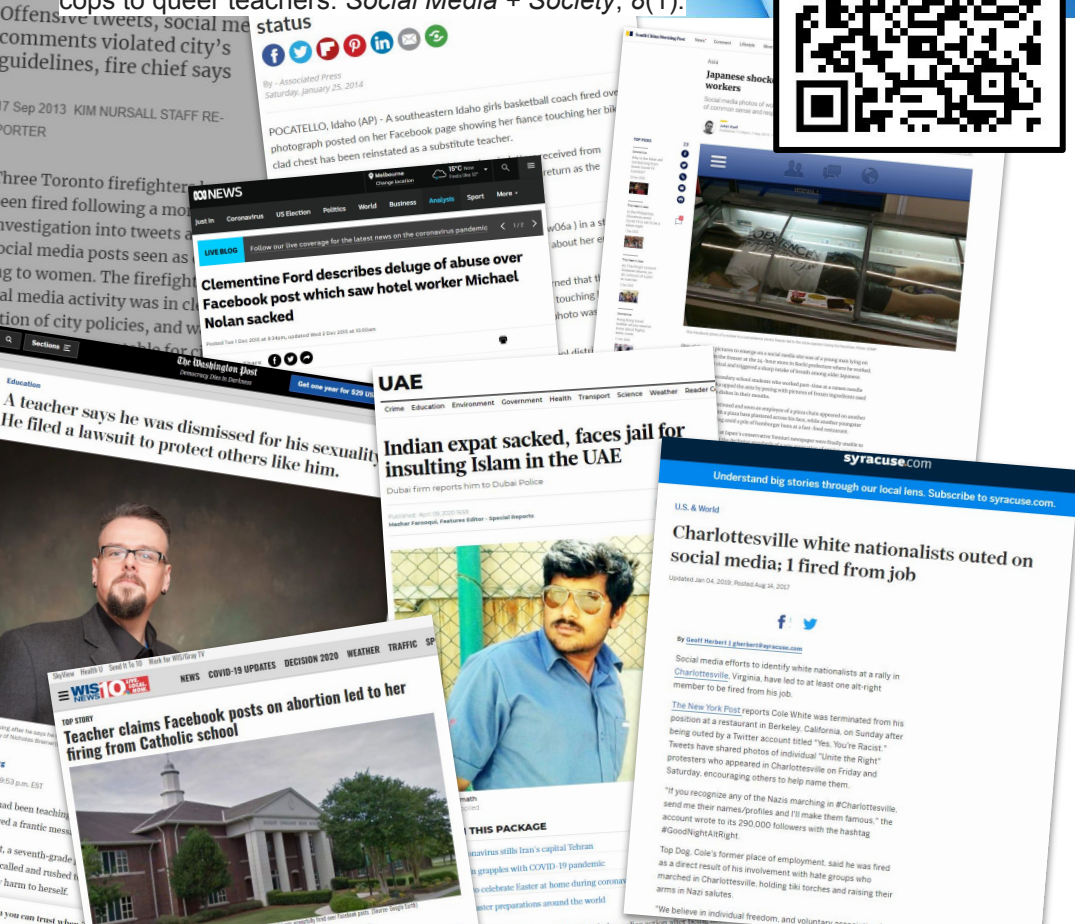
Funded by the ARC DECRA

<b>Pillar 1</b> News Media Analysis	<b>Pillar 2</b> School Policy Analysis	<b>Pillar 3</b> Focus groups w/ Young People	<b>Pillar 4</b> Interviews w/ Managers
<p><b>What are the dominant themes in news articles discussing the role of social media in employment?</b></p> <p><b>Methods:</b> Thematic analysis of 312 news media articles, over a 10 year period</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Hiring, firing, all social media platforms, sponsorship, recruitment, etc.</p> <p>Robards &amp; Graf 2022 in <i>Social Media + Society</i></p>	<p><b>How do schools frame social media use and behaviour with students in official policy documents?</b></p> <p><b>Methods:</b> Thematic analysis of public policies related to technology use on school websites (public and private schools)</p> <p>36 public policies from 200 schools</p>	<p><b>How do young people conceptualise 'professional identity' in networked publics? Current and future.</b></p> <p><b>Methods:</b> 13 focus groups with 72 young people, aged 16-35 (avg 22.5)</p> <p><b>Groups:</b> High school (x3), retail/customer service (x3), creative (x2), health workers, education, government, mixed LGBTQ</p>	<p><b>How do HR managers and recruiters use social media to vet potential applicants? Or people booking creatives for shows?</b></p> <p><b>Methods:</b> 12 interviews with recruiters, managers and HR staff, aged 20-42 (avg 33.3)</p>

Download the report



Robards, B., & Graf, D. (2022). "How a Facebook update can cost you your job": News coverage of employment terminations following social media disclosures, from racist cops to queer teachers. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1).



We collected 312 English-language news stories from 2010-2020 around the world. The news stories collected centered on narratives of job terminations as a result of social media content.

Interested in:

1. the capacities of social media to reveal, draw attention to, and expose misconduct, harassment, violence; &
2. the 'hidden curriculum of surveillance' (Duffy & Chan 2019), and the mediation of 'professional value' (van Dijck 2013) in networked publics

Who are these stories about?  
What are the reasons given for being fired?  
What patterns are there in these stories?

# 'Self' vs 'Third party' posts

The 312 news articles we analysed were split into 2 broad groups: 'self' posts and 'third party' posts.

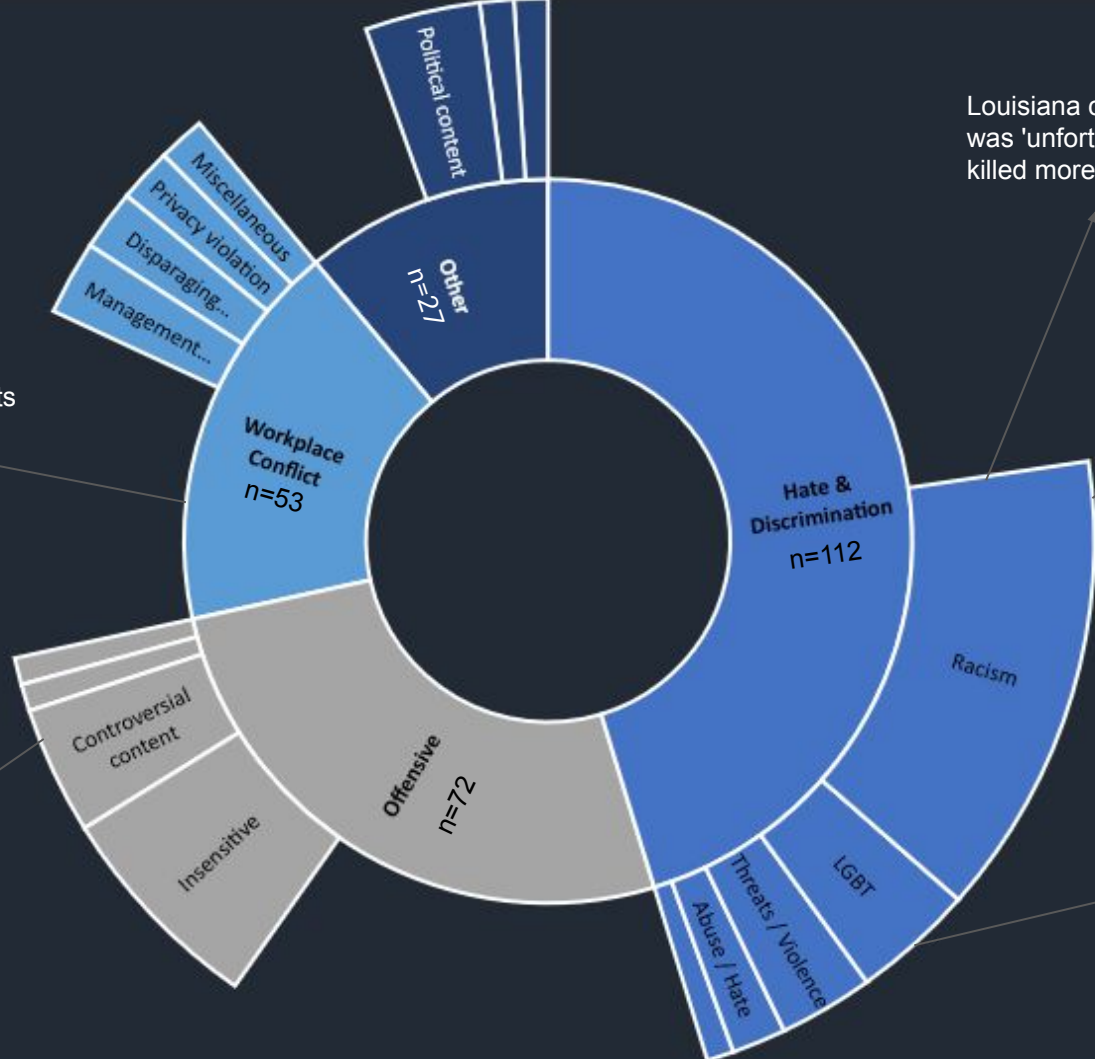
The majority of terminations were the result of 'self made' social media posts (n=264).

There was also a number (n=48) of terminations that were the result of 'third party posts'. These terminations were the result of another individual uploading to social media.

## Who was fired?

Law enforcement	62	20%
Education (incl teachers, principals, uni academics, administrators, etc.)	41	13%
Hospitality	27	9%
Media (journalists, presenters, etc.)	24	8%
Medical professionals	22	7%
Retail workers	12	4%
Government employees/officials	10	3%
Transport workers	10	3%
Finance workers (banks, etc.)	7	2%
Firefighters	7	2%
...		

n=264



Louisiana cop fired for suggesting it was 'unfortunate' coronavirus hadn't killed more black people.

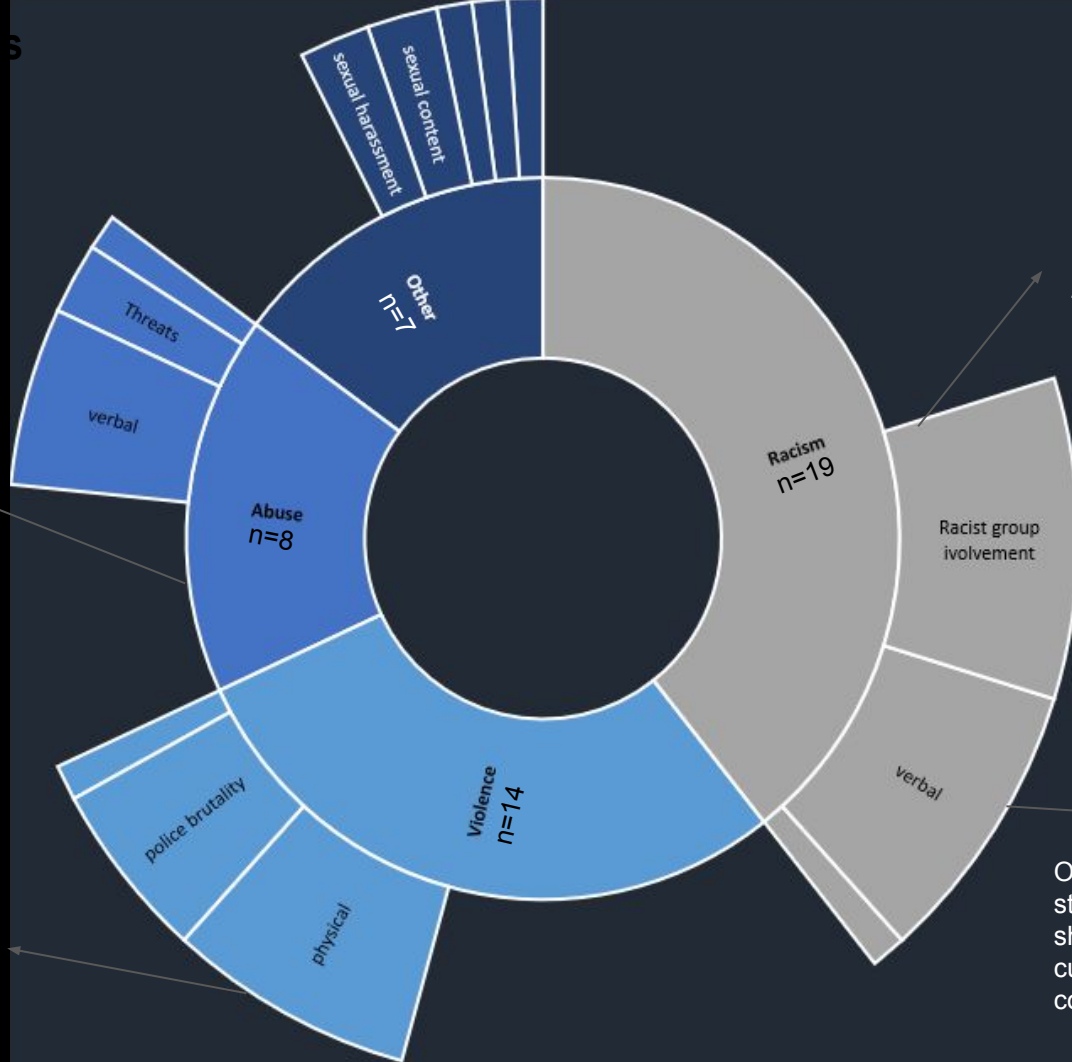
Mount Eaton police officer fired over racist Facebook post of George Floyd

School chaplain sacked over Facebook post calling homosexuality 'not normal'; A Hobart school chaplain has been sacked for re-posting a comment on Facebook that described homosexuality as "not normal".

You're fired! The hazards of Facebook Online complaint costs Coles worker her job.

Fired Garces teacher stands by his posts on social media calling Black Lives Matter a 'terrorist organization'.

n=48



Florida man curses out elderly woman who asked him to wear a mask at Costco.

Charlottesville white nationalists outed on social media; fired from job.

South Burlington pizza cook fired after attending Charlottesville rally.

Rioters got rowdy, then got fired - In age of social media, after-work antics can cost workers their jobs.

Outspoken Naperville gas station clerk fired - Video showed him telling Hispanic customers 'to go back to their country'.

# Conclusions from news media study...

- Clear patterns around who the stories are about: law enforcement, educators, and workers in media, health, retail, and government → people in positions and professions of power and in roles of 'service';
- Dominant themes in stories: racism, violence, harassment, queerphobia. People being fired for BEING racist, misogynistic, queerphobic -- but also for being anti-racist, calling out harassment, and coming out as queer;
- These stories normalise the 'hidden curriculum of surveillance' (Duffy & Chan 2019) where 'private' social media becomes entrenched in employment processes around hiring, firing, and career advancement.



# The Social Media & Employment Project

'The impact of social media on the employment prospects of young Australians'

Funded by the ARC DECRA

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→ RQ: What **strategies** do young people use to **manage privacy** and **create professional identities** (or not) on social media as they prepare for **imagined employment futures**?



# Settings, friending, and imagined audiences

- It was common to set profiles/accounts to private, be discerning with friending strategies, and/or use aliases
- Friending/following people at work was complicated:
  - Finley (25, non-binary) explained that when they were working their hospitality jobs ‘it’s pretty much okay to like **drop the veneer** and chat a bit of shit with the people you’re working with’, but in other ‘more professional’ roles (‘like not-for-profits or company places’), they felt they ‘had to sort of be like on all the time. So sharing my social media would be **too revealing**’.



# Platform-shifting + profile-tabbing: Managing multiple performative contexts

- Mitch (28, male) wouldn't put anything 'controversial' on Facebook (wide network); Instagram was smaller and thus safer when it came to how people would read and interpret
- David (18, male) and his friends used a second account on Instagram, where one was more public, and the other 'more their personal life, you know, not the one that we used to show to the wider spectrum of people'
- Lucy (19, female): 'I tend to really filter the content so that I'm posting very little on my main accounts. That's more just for people who know me and then I have other accounts that I have under different names where I can post more freely... I have to be very conscious of what I post, especially if I share opinions about, you know, childbirth and things like that about midwifery practices. I have to be very, very careful about that or not share a lot of information about what I'm doing or who I'm working with **because that can have an impact on my career as well in the future**'.



# Scrolling back, revising digital traces, and turning to ephemeral social media

Kody (23, male): 'For a while, like over the last year, when memories – cause memories pop up on Facebook, like on this day – so if I see something that's like, you know, maybe a little cringe or whatever, I'll just, I'll just delete it there. As far as tweets, probably every couple of weeks, [I] just scroll back through and **see if the tweets I tweet are still necessary on my profile**'.

Ally (20, female): 'I used to go back and **edit the posts that I thought were embarrassing**. Cause that's probably what they were and well, nowadays I just **don't do permanent posts**. I just put on my story [Instagram] and that's a temporary, like 24 hour window... So it's all temporary'.



# Control strategies closely linked to imagined current or potential future employers

Eva (20, female): 'so as far as things like political views, religious views, anything that is kind of a slightly darker humour, regardless of whether that... makes up your current identity. **If it's not to be mentioned in an interview**, I probably, I wouldn't post it'.

Anil (24, male): 'I'm like really cautious with regard to what I post on my Instagram, I'm like kind of, **low-key conscious that my potential employers might check it out and they might form a negative opinion of me**. Especially in terms of, if I like go out, have a good time, I kind of refrain from posting anything just because it **might come back to haunt**. I mean, maybe I'm being a bit paranoid at this moment, but yeah'.



# Anxieties about being taken out of context

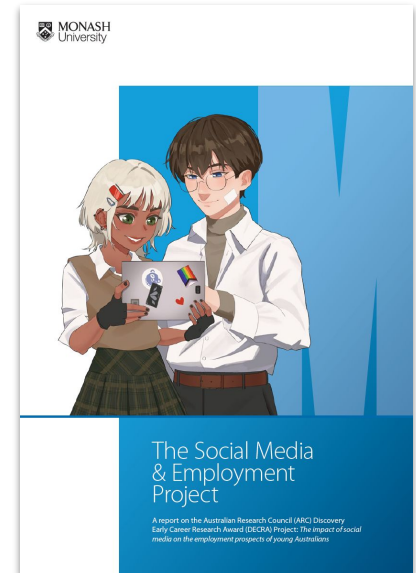
- Howie (25, male): 'people can take screenshots and... **use it against you**'.
- Ally (20, female): 'even if you delete it [a post on social media], it's still like been there. One of my friends who has a screenshot [of an old post] that they send to me sometimes, like just as a joke. **It always stays with you**'.





# Key takeaways from this study

- Young people have complex and nuanced strategies for managing privacy and exerting control on social media: clear friending/following strategies (differing from workplace to workplace), using aliases, maintaining different platforms/profiles, reviewing old posts and friends lists, etc.
- These practices are both operating within the parameters of platform affordances, and through 'off-label' tactics (that sometimes become incorporated into platforms, like quickly switching between accounts)
- Most concerning though: Significant pressures and anxieties around social media use in the context of imagined employment futures, internalised through persistent waves of moral panics around young people's social media use (see news stories)



# A guide for Schools, Teachers, and Parents on how to help young people think about social media and their futures

## The Facts:

1

Young people who use social media are experts on how social media platforms work and the cultures that exist on social media, and we can learn a lot from listening to them.

2

Young people can benefit from support, guidance, and conversation to figure out boundaries, friending/following strategies, and how to interpret the content they are seeing.

3

It's important to understand that social media platforms are often seen by young people as private spaces, or spaces where they can hang out with their friends and also figure out who they are, away from prying (adult) eyes, so we need to be respectful of that.

4

Lots of young people today don't have the same kinds of liberties young people in previous generations had to explore, experiment, and make mistakes – think about how far your grandparents, parents, and you could roam around town unsupervised when you were young. How has that changed? Today young people are monitored and controlled by lots of systems and people, so opportunities to hang out informally have largely gone online.

5

This one is not new, but many young people are also often very anxious about their reputations and how they are seen by different people: friends, teachers, family, and even people they haven't met yet like future bosses, uni lecturers and admissions officers, and friends they might make down the line. Social media makes this more complicated.

6

We need to help young people develop strategies and tactics to look after themselves, and each other, without adding to the anxieties and pressures they already face.

A guide for Schools, Teachers, and Parents on how to help young people think about social media and their futures

## The Tips for Parents and Teachers (from young people themselves, and employers):

1

### Talk to young people about privacy settings:

Each platform has a number of different privacy settings that all users should learn about, and check on every now and then (as the default settings can change). Look at your own social media privacy settings, then talk to young people about theirs. Go and look together at the different settings in apps, like Facebook's 'Privacy Checkup'. For private accounts, talk about reviewing and tidying up follower lists every now and then too.

2

### Reflect together on the purpose of social media – why are you using it?

Just for friends? Building a business or portfolio of work? Aspiring influencer? To stay in touch with family? Learning about new topics? Connecting with different communities? You can have multiple profiles and use different platforms for different purposes, and modify your privacy settings and your sharing strategies for each.

3

### Discuss moderating use and curating content:

We have to take control over our social media, not just time spent on apps (although this can be helpful) but things like unfollowing or muting people or content that is distressing, nudging or training algorithms to show more of or less of the kind of content you want to see, and going back to archive, delete, or edit old posts and tags from time to time.

4

### Be data conscious:

Talk about boundaries with information that gets posted (such as any addresses and the names of schools or workplaces) but also explore what data of yours social media companies collect and use (and why they do that).

5

Like any social space, there are risks and dangers with social media, but they can also be fun, help us learn and connect, and reflect on our own lives. Talk to young people about how they look after themselves and their friends, and how to balance the risks and the rewards.



## A guide for young people to help you think about social media and your future



### We have all said or done things we regret or wish we could take back – that's totally normal and part of growing and learning.

Social media can make this more complicated though, as what we do and say can stick around and be taken out of context. Think of cringey posts we made when we were younger, pictures or videos other people take of us and put online, or screenshots that circulate and are saved in places we can't even see.

Some employers are really good at respecting boundaries and acknowledging that people grow and change over time. What we say and post when we are in our early teens is different to how we will think and act in our 20s and 30s. But some employers think that everything online is fair game when making hiring decisions, so we need to be aware of the reality. Up to 90% of employers use social media to vet job applicants. How do we best prepare for this?

## A guide for young people to help you think about social media and your future

### Tips from young people and employers:

1

#### Check your privacy settings!

Each platform has a number of different privacy settings that all users should learn about, and check on every now and then (as the default settings can change). Check to see who can see what, and make use of functions like Instagram's 'close friends list' to share stories with smaller groups. If your account is private, every now and then review your followers list too.

2

#### Think carefully about what you are using social media for:

Just for friends? Building a business or portfolio of work? Aspiring influencer? To stay in touch with family? You can have multiple profiles and use different platforms for different purposes, and modify your privacy settings and your sharing strategies for each.

3

#### Social media moderation and curation:

We have to take control over our social media, not just time spent on apps (although this can be helpful) but things like unfollowing or muting people or content that is distressing, nudging or training algorithms to show more of or less of the kind of content you want to see, and going back to archive, delete, or edit old posts and tags from time to time.

4

#### Be data conscious:

Be aware of the personal information you post, such as any addresses, the school you go to, where you work, and other identifying information. Also explore what data of yours social media companies collect and use – take a look for instance at Facebook's ad preferences they have for you (Settings > Ad Preferences).

5

#### Remember things can be taken out of context and screenshot.

Look after your friends, and point out when you think things they have posted are not okay, might come back to haunt them, or might upset someone else. Be respectful of the privacy of people you follow too.



Amid much chatter over restricting access for children, we should reflect on our own use and how platforms can be better designed.

Andrew Z. H. Yee

Here is a thought experiment. Imagine, for one year, every adult above the age of 21 is banned from social media. No Facebook. No Instagram. No TikTok for the over-20s.

There would be no influencers hawking supplements or dishing out dodgy financial advice. Likewise, those unverified health warnings forwarded by your uncle on WhatsApp would be gone.

What happens next? Scam rates plummet. The vast architecture of online fraud, including investment schemes, romance scams and phishing operations, collapse for want of its primary victims and perpetrators. Disinformation campaigns lose their most reliable amplifiers.

Comment sections – historically the internet's open sewers – run clear. And in the sudden silence, social media platforms begin to look, tentatively, like a place that children may be safe in.

I am being provocative, of course.

**FROM BLUNT BANS TO NUANCED APPROACHES FOCUSED ON DESIGN**

The debate about children and social media has, in recent weeks, gained fresh momentum. Several governments have moved towards age-restriction frameworks, and Singapore, to our credit, has signalled that it intends to go further than the blunt instrument of a ban. In April, Health Minister Ong Ye



Social media platforms designed around the dignity and agency of their youngest users would, in the end, make for a better experience for the rest of us as well, says the writer. PHOTO: UNPLASH

Kung highlighted that several salient risks of social media to teen mental health come from specific design features such as infinite scroll, algorithmically driven feeds and autoplay. In a recent opinion article for The Straits Times, Minister for Digital Development and Information Josephine Teo argued for the need to focus on design accountability and platform responsibility. Indeed, a landmark case where Meta and YouTube were found liable for the social media addiction of a young woman in the United States signals a legal and political consensus forming around the idea that platform

design is not neutral, and that design that enables harm should carry consequences. As a researcher working on children's use of media, I find it encouraging to see political leaders adopt nuanced, evidence-based and thoughtful approaches to this issue. Bans are a policy of exhaustion, reached when imagination runs out. They tell us what we are afraid of instead of what we can aspire to. Despite this, the calls for outright social media bans for children and teenagers persist, and they are worth taking seriously. The assumption behind many of these proposals is that

children are passive victims and that they scroll, absorb and suffer from social media use. Thus, they must be shielded by removal. In my own academic work, I have questioned the evidentiary basis of much media-time-based research and asked whose interests the discourse of digital harm most reliably serves. The answer is rarely families, nor children. **CHILDREN AS ACTIVE AGENTS RATHER THAN PASSIVE AUDIENCES**

A recent think piece in the newsletter Psyche asked a

question that has stayed with me: Have online worlds become the last free places for children? The question is pointed because the answer, for many young people, is "yes".

This is especially so for children who are neurodivergent, socially anxious or simply different in ways that make the physical social world hostile. For these young people, online communities are not a retreat from real life. They are where belonging is found, where creativity is exercised without judgment, and where the child who cannot find her people in a classroom of 30 can find someone who experiences the world like her. Banning that child from social media is simply a second exclusion, dressed up as protection.

What we need instead is to build digital spaces where children are treated as active agents of their own media use, not passive audiences. Safety for passive audiences, when narrowly defined, can be achieved through restriction. We can block certain types of content from reaching them, limit their time spent, or ban them from certain platforms completely.

Respecting and encouraging agency, however, requires something far more demanding, it requires environments designed to serve a child's interests, needs, curiosity and well-being, rather than engineering to maximise the time they spend on screen.

**THE PROBLEM WITH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR CHILDREN**

This is where the critique of the attention economy becomes unavoidable. The business model underlying most social media is not compatible with child agency. Platforms profit from engagement, and engagement is most reliably produced through emotional provocation, social comparison and the compulsive architecture of infinite scroll.

These are intentionally designed. When children enter these spaces, platforms are not

there to serve them. They are trying to keep them hooked, for as long as possible, because that is how the money is made. Children's well-being is an afterthought.

Regulation must therefore go beyond safety mandates to challenge the model itself. These include algorithmic transparency, prohibition of engagement-maximising design features, and concrete legal liability for platforms that demonstrably subordinate child welfare to commercial interest.

**MAKE SOCIAL MEDIA LESS 'ADULT'**

I hope it is clear by now that I am not actually advocating a social media ban for adults. Instead, I am suggesting that when we imagine such a scenario and see how much safer platforms can become, we are inadvertently acknowledging something important. Specifically, that the greatest threats to children online are not children. They are adult predators, adult fraudsters, adult culture warriors and adult platform executives who have chosen, year after year, to build environments that prioritise engagement over well-being.

Children do not need to be removed from social media. Instead, social media platforms need to be made less adult in the worse sense of that word. They should be less cynical, less extractive, less indifferent to the vulnerability of those who have the least power within it.

In fact, social media platforms designed around the dignity and agency of their youngest users would, in the end, make for a better experience for the rest of us too. Imagine now if we can go beyond this simple thought experiment and do something about all this.

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So what does all this mean in the context of the social media ban?

Can we imagine alternatives to 'abstinence only'?

My call to action:

1. Working with/forcing platforms to include safety by design AND tackling the hard job of platform regulation, governance, moderation;
2. Listening to young people and learning from them: privacy management strategies, 'algorithmic gossip', what works and what doesn't;
3. Supporting young people to develop critical social media literacies