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YOUTH DIGITAL PULSE REPORT

Edition One



Source: Bryan Ong (2025) "Spirit of Youths".

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Executive Summary

This study set out to answer a question that has divided youth, parents and academics alike: if broad restrictions on youth social media access are not the answer, what is? Drawing on the experience and opinions of 227 Singaporean youths aged 13–35, YouthTechSG examined how young people experience social media, the harms they encounter, and which forms of protection they consider workable and trustworthy.

Social media is not a lost cause, but it is not harmless either.
Respondents spend an average of 4.9 hours a day on social media, driven mainly by content consumption (78.4% watch reels or feed content) and staying connected with friends and family. Youth readily named its harms — most prominently addiction and doomscrolling (21.3%), cyberbullying and anonymity-enabled toxicity (20.0%), exposure to inappropriate content (16.8%), comparison culture eroding self-confidence (14.8%), and algorithmic echo chambers (11.0%). Yet, the same respondents pointed to the genuine value of these online spaces: community-building, identity formation (especially for niche or marginalised youth segments), and exposure to alternative perspectives.

A striking 43.2% reported experiencing frequent positive and negative effects simultaneously — the tension is less about whether social media is "good" or "bad" and more about whether users retain control over their attention and time.

This tension shows up sharply in the fuller dataset: 68.5% of respondents reported at least one form of harm in the past month, yet the median rating of their overall social-media experience was still 7 out of 10 — and even among those who experienced harm, 63.2% rated their experience 7 or higher. The cost is also uneven: negative mood impact rose from 8.6% among respondents reporting no harms to 70.0% among those reporting three or more, suggesting it is the breadth of exposure, not any single harm that does the damage.

Executive Summary

Youths' resistance to broad restrictions should not be mistaken for opposition to online safety measures altogether. The opposition is just to blunt ones. 79% of respondents rejected an outright ban on social media, generally viewing it as a "cliff effect" that strips youth of the chance to build judgement, while doing little to address the underlying culture of harmful behaviour. Measures that make the online environment safer, like better in-app reporting and support tools, and more non-social-media "third spaces" for youth were rated most effective. Structural, feature-level safeguards (restricting algorithmic feeds, ending infinite scroll, platform legal responsibility) were seen more favourably than blanket time limits.

This preference has a clear basis: when asked where harm actually originates, 45.0% of respondents pointed to platform-design mechanisms (like algorithmic feeds) as the primary source, ahead of user or AI-generated content at 33.3%. But self-management has limits: among respondents who experienced harm, only 6.6% disclosed it to an adult or formal support channel, and close to one in five did nothing at all — a reminder that safeguards cannot rely on youth reporting harm themselves.

Age-tiered access has real support, but three conditions determine whether youth will accept it. Roughly three-quarters of respondents saw graduated access, no access under 6, age-appropriate access growing through adolescence, full access by 18 — as at least partially effective, framing it as a "progression ladder" that respects growing autonomy.

Support hinges on: (1) proportionate implementation that doesn't feel arbitrary or punitive, (2) privacy-preserving age verification that doesn't over-collect personal data, and (3) complementary education so restriction isn't the only intervention. The single largest practical concern, by a wide margin, was circumvention: 72% of youth said they would (or already do) find ways around age-assurance rules, having already normalised faking their age to join platforms.

Executive Summary

Responsibility is viewed as shared, but not equally distributed. Youth consistently placed government and platforms at the top of the responsibility ranking, alongside parents, while still holding themselves and content creators accountable for the culture they help shape. Each actor was tied to a distinct role: government sets and enforces baseline rules; platforms are expected to design safer environments and moderation tools; parents guide early digital habits; schools should teach concrete digital-navigation skills rather than generic warnings; and youth are expected to exercise judgement over their own conduct, while not being able to fix structural problems alone.

Crucially, shared responsibility is not equal responsibility: youth can seek support and communicate their needs, but only the other actors hold the power to fix systemic flaws and make online spaces safer by design.

The fuller report frames these asks around a simple image: social media has become a playground for older youth, and like any playground, safety is a shared responsibility. Platforms and government must build it safely; parents must be there when young people fall, rather than trying to prevent every difficult experience; and schools and youth must equip young people to navigate it themselves. **As the report puts it: "the answer is not to remove the playground — it is to make it safer to use."**

Four themes youth raised for improving social media culture:

1. Education on how to navigate through the harms, not just restriction
2. Encouraging regulations that are sensitive to the needs of youth
3. Shared but differentiated responsibility across the eco-system
4. Better cultivation of empathy and online etiquette among users

Introduction

Much has been written about the harms associated with introducing social media access to adolescents. Yet, proposed solutions that seek to substantially restrict or remove youths' access to social media continue to provoke divided sentiment among youth, parents and academics. This raises a central question: if we should not take away the source of the harm, then what can be done about it?

Through the first edition of Sip n' Spill, YouthTechSG took this question to our peers. The study explored how youth perceive social media culture, how it shapes their experiences online, and how they view proposed measures intended to make online spaces safer.

Acknowledgements

This study was undertaken by the YouthTechSG Advocacy Team, with the support of the YouthTechSG Board and like-minded partners. We extend our sincere appreciation to Keene Chong, Chelsea Ling Xinyi, Adelei Tock, and Shhreya Balasubramanian, whose contributions were instrumental to this report.

We are especially grateful to Dr Chew Han Ei for his invaluable guidance and assistance in refining this report. Finally, we thank our venue host Grovve, the workshop facilitators, youth vendors and participants who accompanied us on this journey. Your time, perspectives, and trust made this work possible.



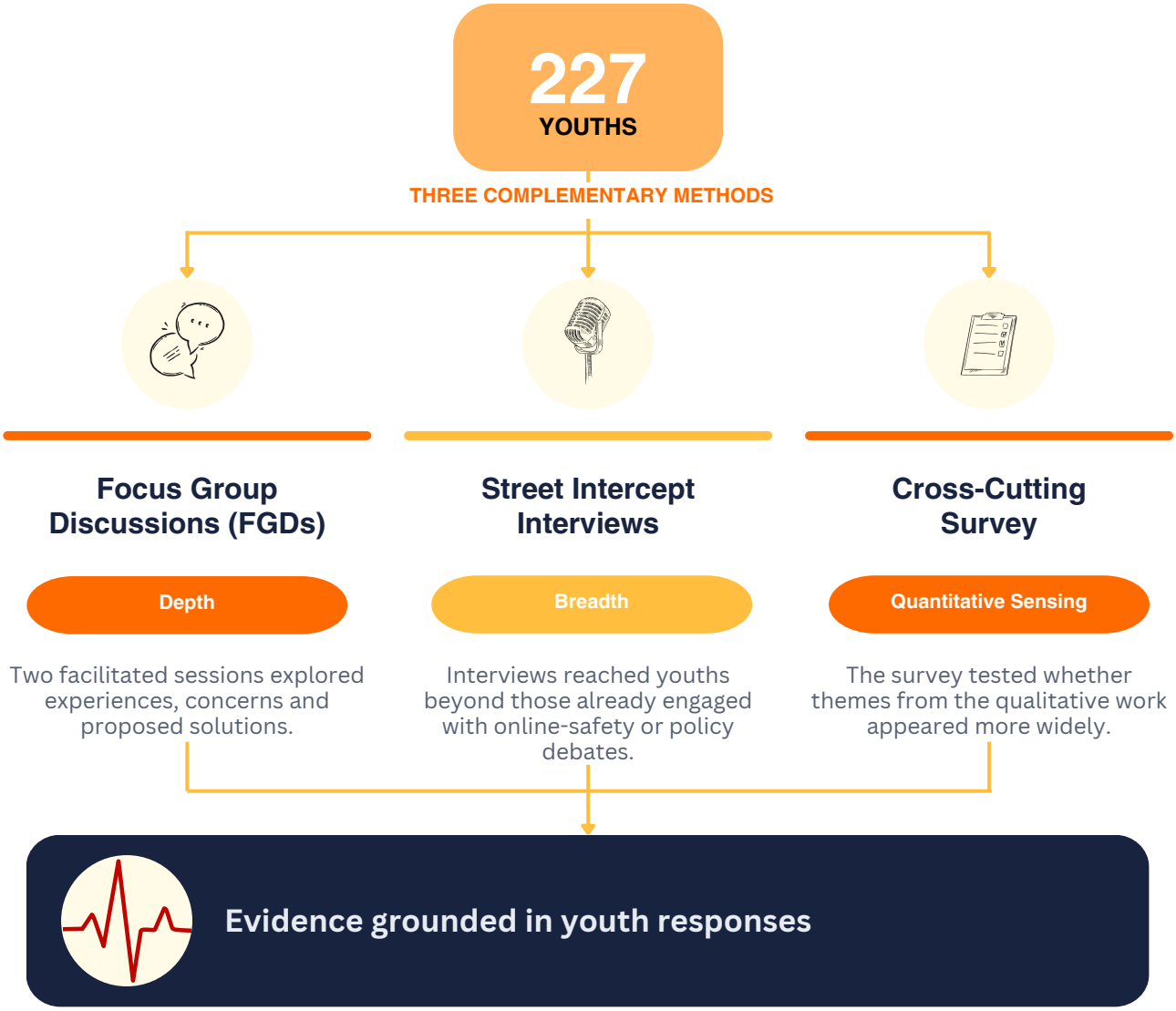
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Methodology

The Youth Digital Pulse, known widely to youth participants as 'Sip n' Spill', uses a mixed-methods approach to understand how young people experience social media, the harms they encounter, and the forms of protection they consider workable and trustworthy. This report draws from a dataset comprising 227 youths aged 13–35 in Singapore.



Ethics

Responses were anonymised before analysis, with additional care taken when engaging participants below 18. **All names used in this report have been changed to protect the privacy of our respondents.**

Methodology

The study ran in two sequential phases, each defined by topic. Phase 1 examined experiences on social media. Phase 2 examined their expectations of, and views on responsibility for keeping online spaces safer. Findings from Phase 1 were used to revise the Phase 2 discussion guides. Each phase paired focus group discussions (FGDs) with street intercept interviews. A survey ran across both phases as the quantitative component.

Qualitative strand

The format of our FGDs differed from that of regular research FGDs by intentionally creating a low-stakes environment for youths to explain their experiences, concerns and proposed solutions on their own terms. The street intercept interviews were conducted by approaching youths in public hotspot spaces to reach those who would not volunteer for a formal session, or who are not already active in online safety and policy conversations, which offsets the self-selection that channel-based recruitment invites.

Quantitative strand

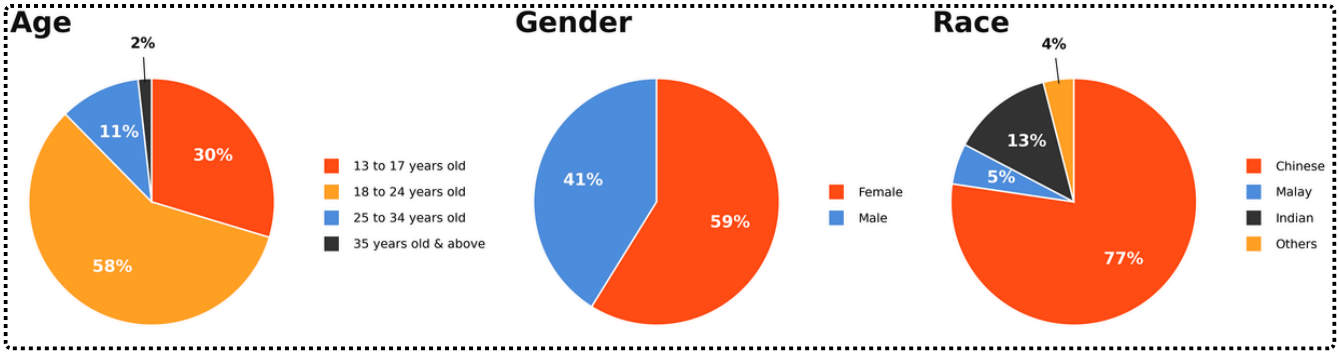
The survey was fielded online across both phases and distributed through youth channels and networks, drawing 111 completed responses. Responses were analysed descriptively, as counts and percentages.

Analysis and review

Responses across all three modalities were cleaned and coded thematically. Coded findings were then compared across modalities to establish where they converged and where they did not. All aggregated findings were first reviewed by the writers' team, then subjected to separate internal red-team reviews with persons not involved in the data collection, cleaning or report writing to identify any biases or assumptions made in the interpretation. The red team also went through the raw responses to ensure that conclusions drawn were adequately supported by participants' original responses.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The following figures present the demographic profile of the study's sample in this study (n=227).



As far as possible, we sought to ensure that the sample broadly reflected Singapore's national demographic profile by age, gender and race, based on data from the Singapore Department of Statistics.

The **qualitative strand** of the study involved 116 youths, with a mean age of 19 years (rounded to the nearest year). Of these, 45 participants (38.8%) took part in Focus Group Discussions, while 71 participants (61.2%) were engaged through Street Intercept Interviews.

The **quantitative strand** of the study involved 111 youths, with a mean age of 21 years (rounded to the nearest year).







Source: Sip n' Spill File (Snapshots from the various initiatives)

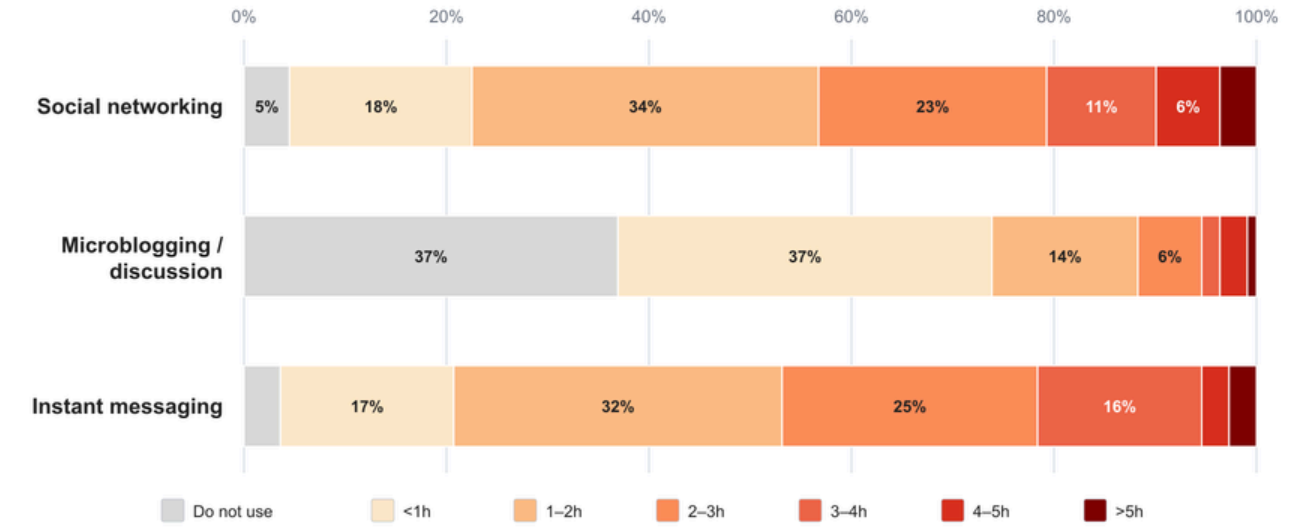
01 Experiences on Social Media

(A) How are youths using social media

A survey conducted by CNA–IPS in 2025 found that teenagers aged 13–19 spent an average of 8.5 hours per day across screens, with social media taking up about an average of 1.5 hours [1]. Our survey responses indicated a respondent average of 4.9 hours per day across social media platforms, which includes social networking, microblogging, instant messaging. We believe this is still largely congruent with the CNA-IPS data.

One possible reason for the higher average could be the use of a more inclusive definition of social media in our survey, which spans across three broad categories. Social networking platforms are centred on profiles, feeds and networked interaction; microblogging and discussion-based platforms are organised around public posts, commentary and topic-based exchanges; and instant messaging platforms facilitate direct and group communication through services such as WhatsApp and Telegram. The data indicate that youths spend most of their time in networked content and communication environments.

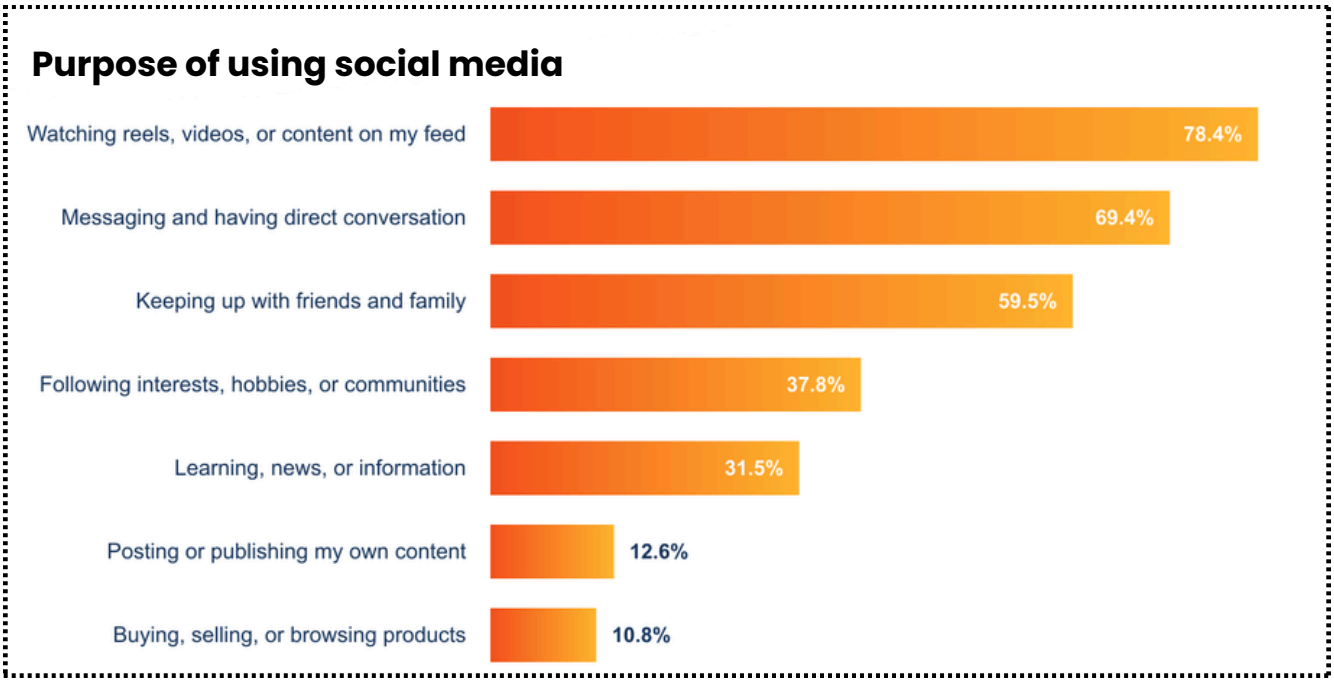
Average time spent by platform type



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

01 Experiences on Social Media

(A) How are youths using social media



Source: Survey Responses (n=111) (percentages represent overlapping motivations and do not sum to 100%)

Respondents' social media use is driven primarily by content consumption and social connection. Watching reels, videos and other feed-based content was the most commonly selected purpose, cited by 78.4% of respondents.

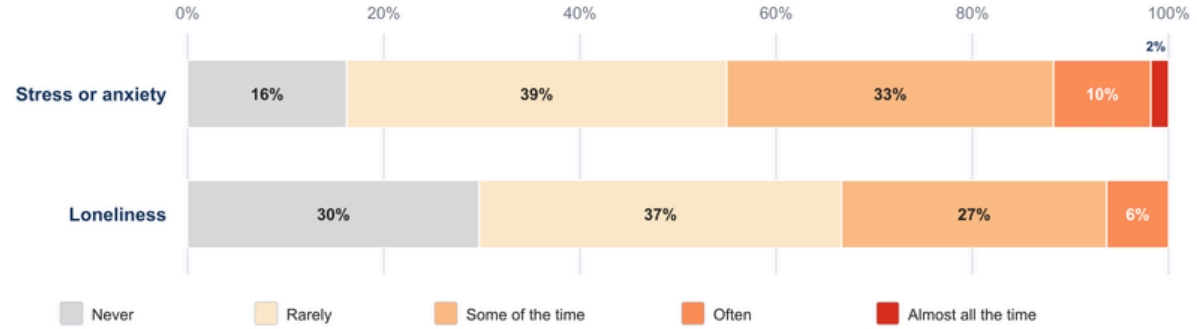
This pattern suggests that, for many youths, social media functions less as a space for active publishing and more as an environment for watching, communicating and staying socially connected. It supports everyday activities such as keeping up with friends, discovering new interests and unwinding through shared content and interaction. Taken together, these findings support the notion of social media acting as a form of social infrastructure. Engagement provides access not only to conversations, but also to shared cultural references, peer updates, communities of interest and informal information flows.

01 Experiences on Social Media

(B) Are social-media experiences universally bad?

Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* describes the shift towards a childhood where young people are more protected against established offline harms but comparatively under-protected online [2].

Feelings of Anxiety and Loneliness arising from using social media



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

From this brief welfare check that we conducted during the survey, there is an undeniable connection between social media use and a negative effects on wellbeing. One of our respondents, Matthew, shares one of the reasons why his experience using social media creates negative feelings.

> "[I] tend to use apps like TikTok and Instagram [to] procrastinate. Then I just scroll, scroll, scroll and then we don't get things done ... it takes away a lot of time from what we're supposed to do."

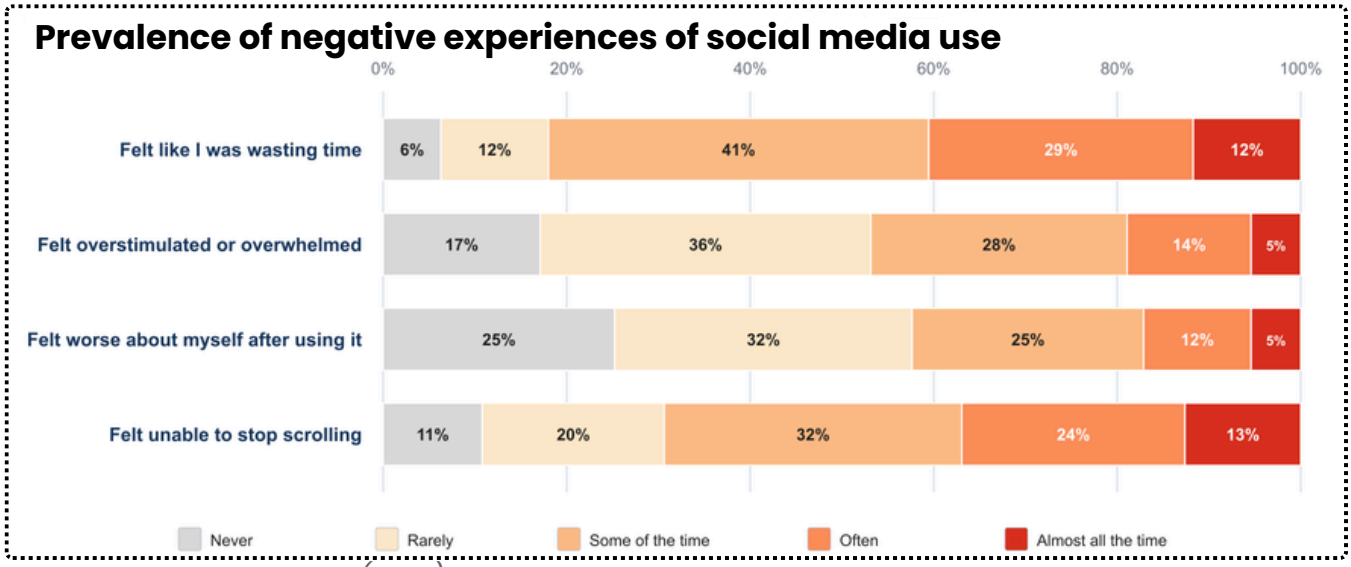


- Matthew, 17

Matthew's experiences reflects the broader stories and responses we have gathered not just from youth his age, but also from older and younger youths.

01 Experiences on Social Media

(B) Are social-media experiences universally bad?



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

41% of respondents often or almost always felt they were wasting time, while difficulty stopping scrolling was nearly as common. For a smaller group, these negative experiences extended beyond time and control to emotional strain, including feeling overstimulated, overwhelmed or worse about themselves after using social media.

At this juncture, it seems that the loss of control over the youths' attention spans is the key consideration as to whether or not social media is bad. This is a harm that is uniquely difficult to identify as there is no recognisable marker of negativity in the experience — it would be different with traditionally established harms like hate speech or cyberbullying. There is increasing concern about this "harm" precipitating unintended consequences, such as lost sleep, displaced activities, emotional fatigue or exposure to content beyond what the user originally intended to view. If left unaddressed, this is possibly a big push factor for youth to reconsider their use of the platforms. We recommend further studies on the perceived negative experiences before coming to a more definite conclusion.

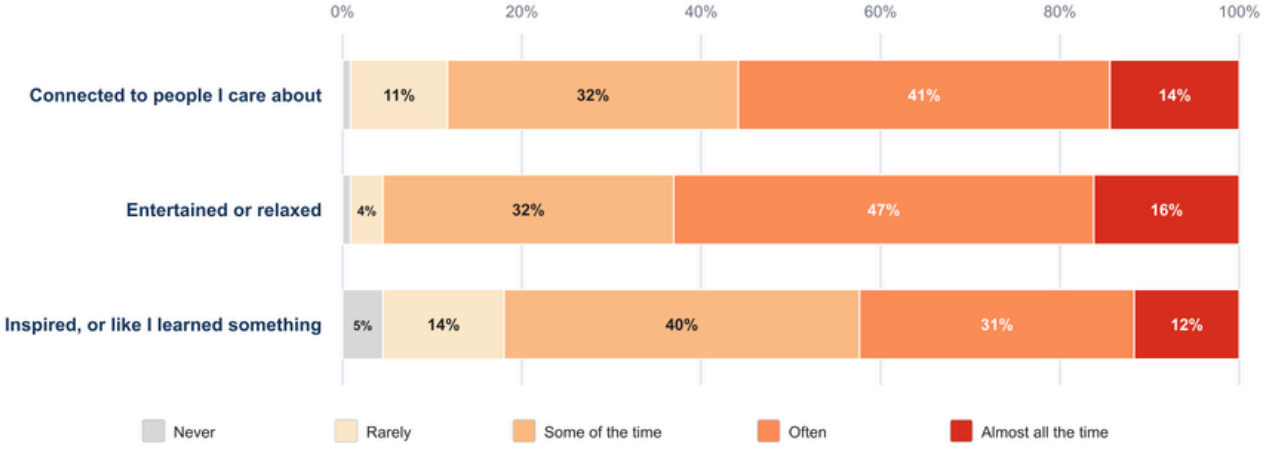
01 Experiences on Social Media

(B) Are social-media experiences universally bad?

The other important conclusion drawn from this portion of the survey is that youths do not hold a wholly positive *or* negative relationship with social media. A derived comparison between the prevalence graphs of the positive and negative experiences on social media found that 43.2% reported simultaneously having at least one positive *and* at least one negative experience often or almost all the time.

The same respondent might therefore feel connected or entertained, while also feeling that they had wasted time or struggled to stop scrolling. The central tension appears to be between the value respondents obtain and the degree of control they retain over their use.

Prevalence of positive experiences on social media

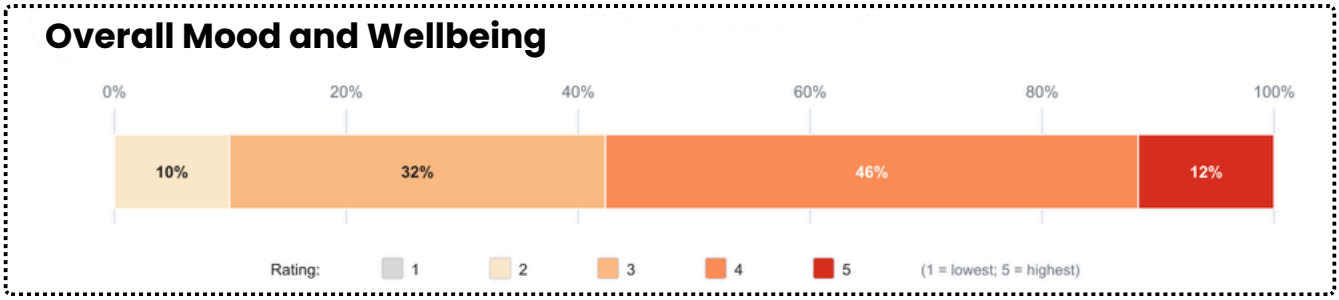


Source: Survey Responses (n=111) (Percentages might not sum to 100 due to rounding)

This duality is also reflected in the respondents' report of their overall mood and wellbeing after using social media for an extended period of time. In the chart on the next page, respondents generally assessed their broader wellbeing positively, **reporting an average score of 3.6 out of 5 and a median of 4,** which swings towards the more positive end of the spectrum.

01 Experiences on Social Media

(B) Are social-media experiences universally bad?



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

Respondents most commonly reported entertainment and relaxation as positive experiences, followed by connection with others and opportunities for learning or inspiration. Participants described using social media to maintain friendships, follow current affairs, seek recommendations and connect with communities formed around shared interests.

One participant described what she would miss if social media disappeared:

> "I'll miss the sense of community ... because we all have the same fondness for whatever show or TV."



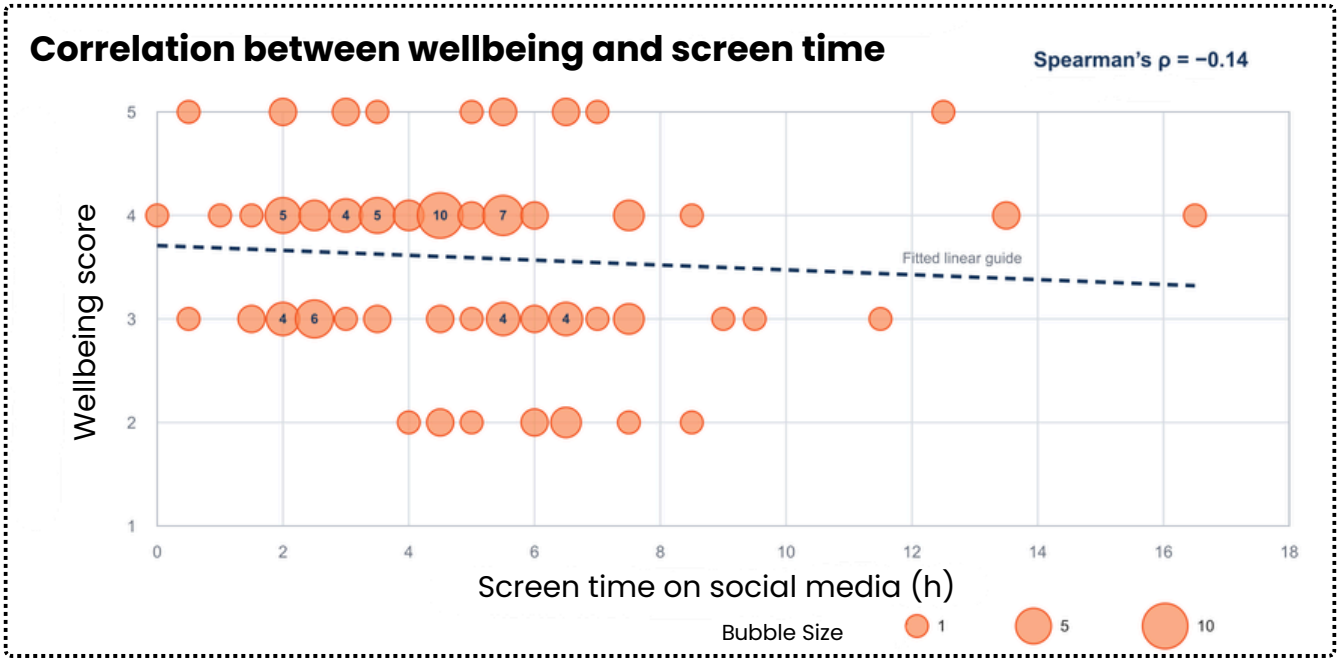
- Abigail, 17

Referring to an online anime fandom, Abigail's account shows how social media can transform an individual interest into a shared social experience. Its value lies not only in providing access to content, but also in connecting youths with communities that may be difficult to find within their immediate offline networks.

01 Experiences on Social Media

(B) Are social-media experiences universally bad?

Drawing towards the close of this section, it is also helpful to assess how the sentiments of our Singaporean youth respondents compare with established global benchmarks in the literature. This is crucial to an understanding of the strength of the connection between the prevalence of negative social media experiences and their relation to screen time.



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

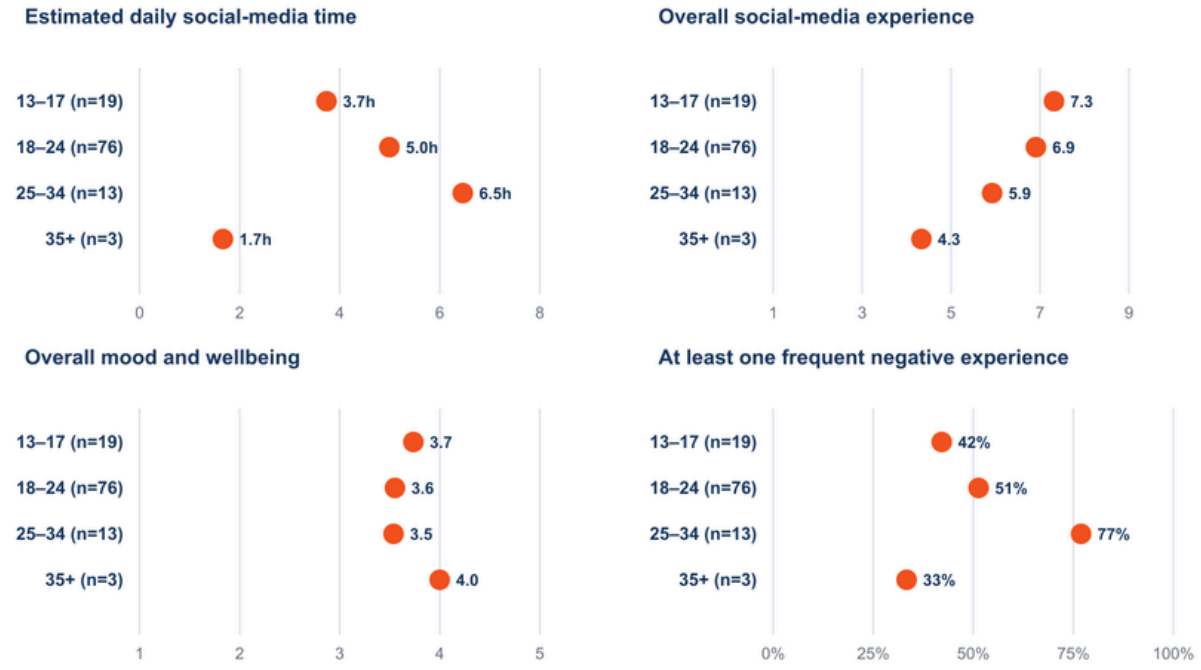
The figure above maps the reported wellbeing scores according to the estimated combined daily social-media time and self-reported wellbeing (Spearman's ρ = -0.14). This pattern is consistent with research from Orben and Przybylski, which found that digital-technology use had a negative but small association with adolescent wellbeing, explaining at most 0.4% of the variation [3]. Taken together, these findings suggest that time online alone does not account for differences in wellbeing and that they do not support differences in wellbeing and therefore do not support a uniformly adverse account of social-media use.

01 Experiences on Social Media

(C) What does screen time explain—and what does it miss?

The figure below uses the existing data on estimated time online and its association with the frequency of different positive and negative experiences to map the overall effect on Singaporean youth. Positive experiences such as connection, entertainment and learning showed little relationship with time spent online. Longer use was more clearly associated with negative experiences involving attention, control and emotional strain.

Social media use and experience online



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

Time online appears to be more closely related to whether respondents retained control over their use than to whether they obtained enjoyment, connection or information from it. This draws back to the earlier conclusion that a respondent may value social media and continue using it extensively while also finding it difficult to disengage. This distinction helps explain how greater use can coexist with a relatively positive overall assessment, and highlights the existing tension between agency and enjoyment while online.

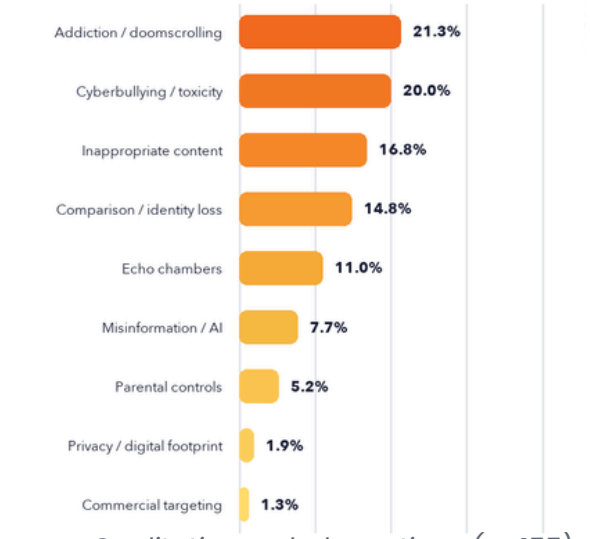
02 Harms on Social Media

(A) Which harms do youth experience the most?

Across the qualitative strand, addiction and doomscrolling accounted for the largest share of coded harm mentions, followed by cyberbullying and anonymity-enabled toxicity, exposure to inappropriate content, comparison culture, and algorithmic echo chambers.

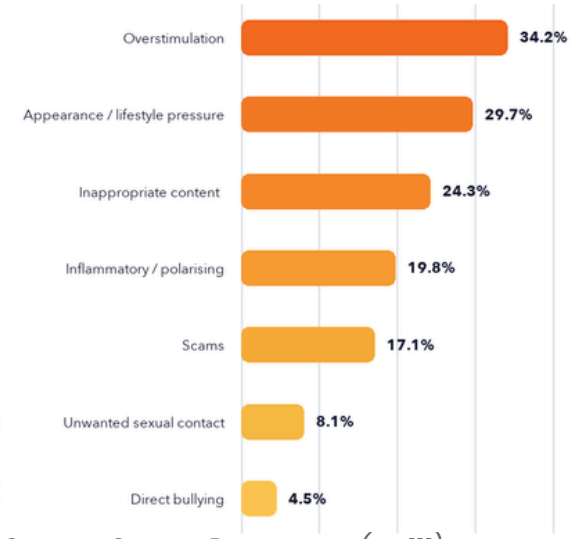
The survey broadly reinforces concerns around attention, social comparison and harmful content. Overstimulation was the most commonly reported experience (34.2%), followed by pressure to look or live a certain way (29.7%), exposure to violence or unwanted sexual content (24.3%), and inflammatory or polarising content (19.8%).

Harm shared in qualitative strand



Source: Qualitative coded mentions (n=155)

Harms reported in survey



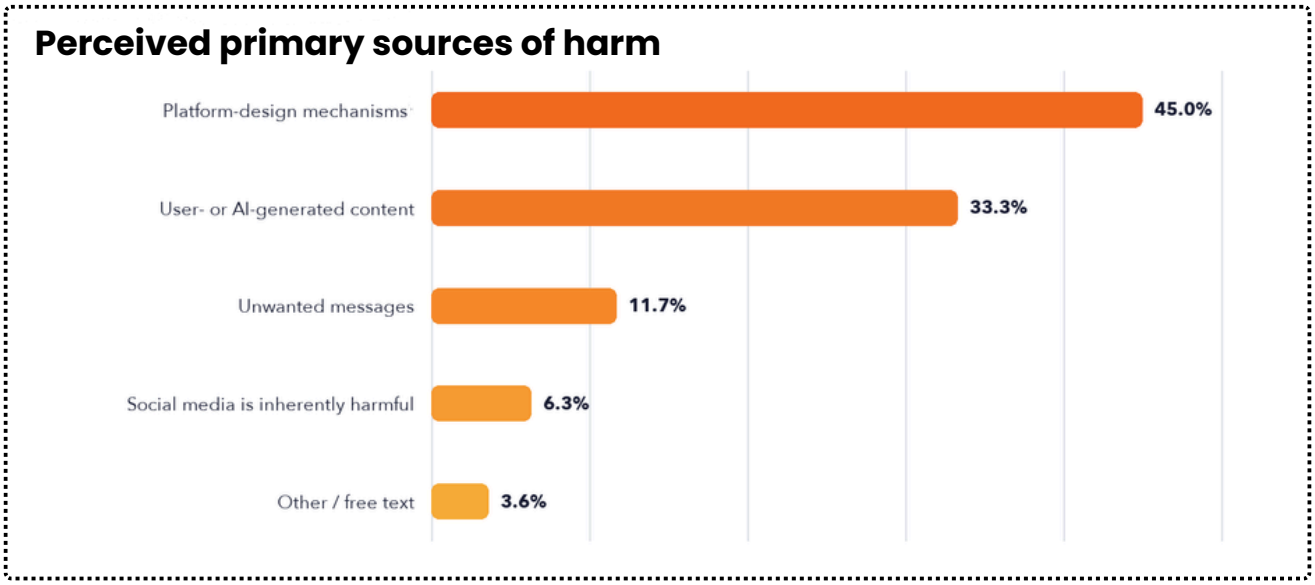
Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

The survey does shift the relative prominence of some harms. Cyberbullying and toxicity accounted for 20.0% of qualitative harm mentions, while only 4.5% of survey respondents reported personally experiencing bullying or harassment in the preceding month. However, the shift does not change its significance. Other current literature does similarly identify cyberbullying or harassment as one of the most prevalent harms encountered by youth [4].

02 Harms on Social Media

(A) Which harms do youth experience the most?

The findings suggest that harm does not originate from a single source. It develops through the interaction of three factors: what users and creators place online, how platforms distribute and repeat that material, and how other users respond to it.



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

When survey respondents were asked to identify what creates the most harm, 45.0% selected a platform-design mechanism (i.e. endless feeds or the way platforms recommend content). A further 33.3% selected user- or AI-generated content, while 11.7% selected unwanted messages from other users.

User behaviour remains an important part of the explanation for poor online conduct. Relative anonymity, reduced social cues and physical distance can weaken the social restraints that operate in face-to-face interaction. This is consistent with Suler's Online Disinhibition Effect, which describes how online environments can lead users to disclose more or behave more intensely than they would offline [5].

02 Harms on Social Media

(A) Which harms do youth experience the most?

Respondents also pointed to users modelling the behaviour of popular accounts and seeking social status by positioning themselves as arbiters of taste. These observations are consistent with René Girard's mimetic theory, which argues that people's desires and behaviours are often shaped through observing and imitating others [6].

> "Yeah, I think people are chasing for likes, engagement, comments, and trying to conform to the social norm, **where they are just losing part of their true self**."



- Cheryl, 16

Comment sections now serve as the epicentre of social media culture, strongly influencing decisions to like, share, or repost. Cheryl's observation reflects a broader concern identified internationally: reliance on external validation can incentivise youths to curate their digital identities around peer approval, with some commentators arguing that this dynamic may also shape offline behaviour in ways that make it more suitable for online presentation and content creation [7].

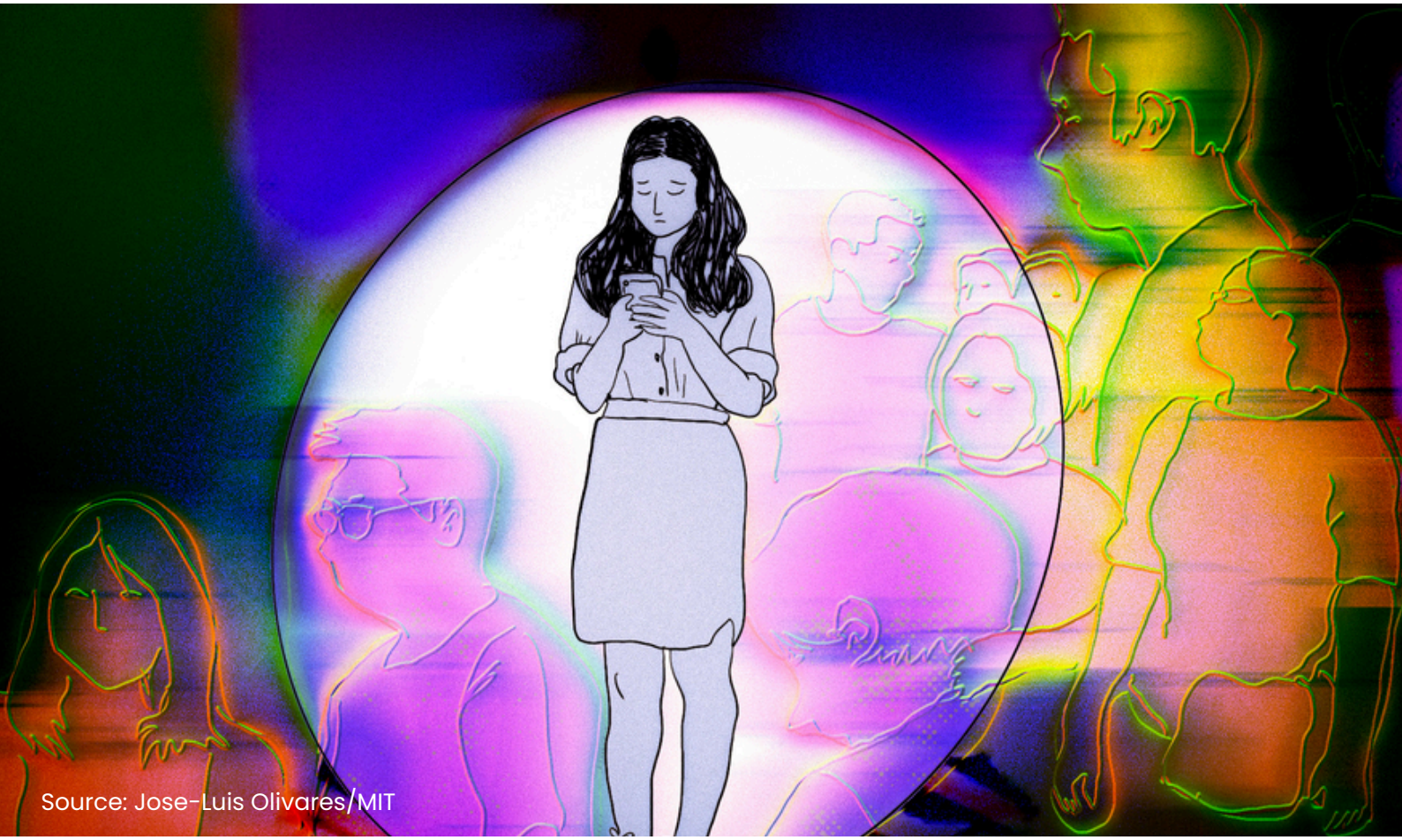


02 Harms On Social Media

(A) Which harms do youth experience the most?

The concern is not simply that idealised content exists. It is that repeated exposure creates a readily available standard against which users evaluate themselves. Experimental research has found that exposure to Facebook produced poorer mood than an appearance-neutral website, with stronger appearance concerns among women already inclined towards social comparison [8].

This supports the distinction between general use and specific mechanisms of harm: the effects depend on the content encountered, how it is interpreted and the user's existing vulnerabilities.



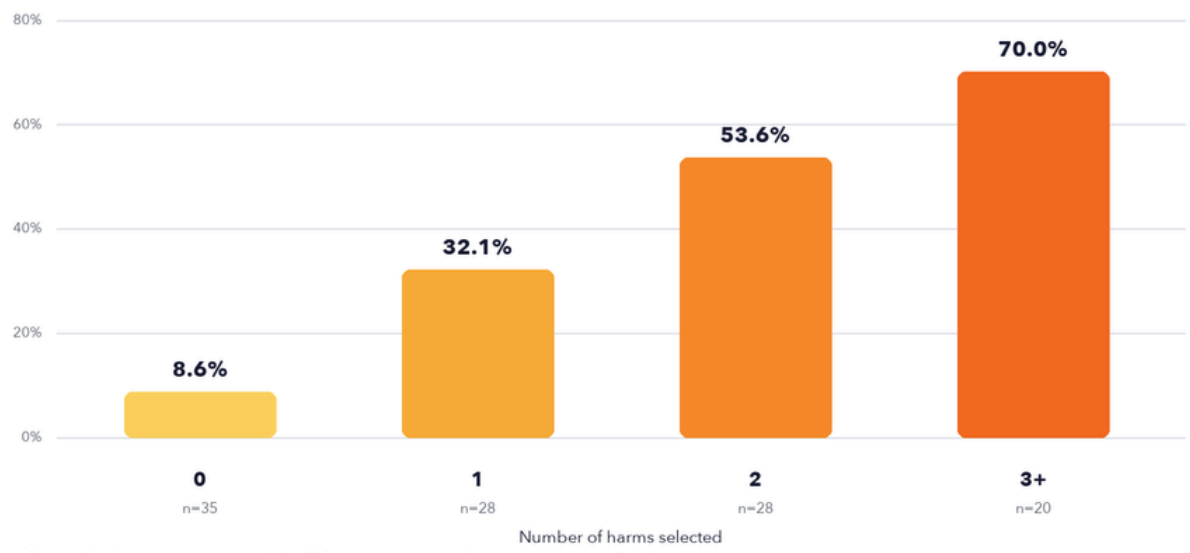
Source: Jose-Luis Olivares/MIT

02 Harms On Social Media

(B) What were youths' responses to harms on social media?

Among respondents who reported no harm, 8.6% reported that their mood had been negatively affected some of the time or often. This rose to 32.1% among respondents reporting one harm, 53.6% among those reporting two harms, and 70.0% among those reporting three or more.

Negative mood impact by number of distinct harms faced



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

These figures show an association rather than proof that the harms caused the change in mood. Nevertheless, the gradient indicates that the breadth of exposure matters. A person facing comparison pressure, polarising recommendations and unwanted contact at the same time may have fewer opportunities to recover between experiences than someone facing a single, isolated incident. The practical implication is that prevalence alone does not identify the respondents most in need of support. The more significant group may be those facing multiple forms of harm, particularly where repeated exposure is combined with limited coping or disclosure.

02 Harms on Social Media

(B) What were youths' responses to harms on social media?

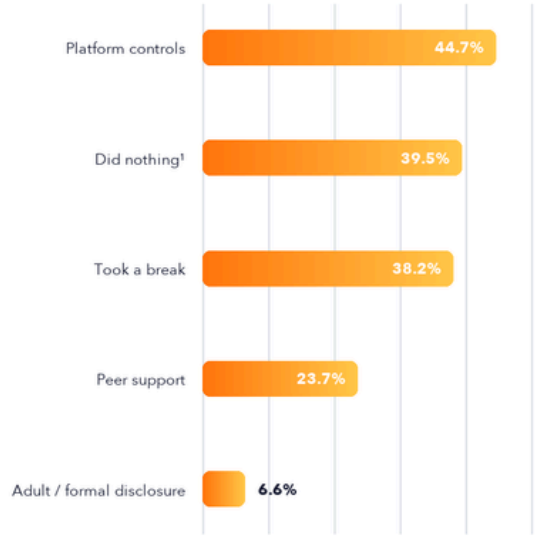
Beyond naming harms, many respondents also described concrete strategies they use to manage or resist them. The methods adopted included curating the feed via platform tools (marking the content as "not interested", unfollowing or blocking the accounts), and this was by far the most common response. Several respondents noted that these tools felt limited or ineffective.

Coping mechanism qualitative thread



Source: Data from FGDs 1-2 (n=43)

Survey coping mechanism



Source: Harm exposed survey respondents (n=76)

"[I] have deleted Twitter (now X) because of the polarizing opinions online."



- Sheryl, 25

02 Harms on Social Media

(B) What were youths' responses to harms on social media?

The combined findings therefore present a more complex picture: many youths exercise agency, but this agency is uneven and often reactive. Blocking, muting and feed curation can reduce immediate exposure, but they usually operate after harmful content has already reached the user. This corresponds with the sentiments presented within the National Youth Council's Youth Panel (#TechHacks) report. The report's 5,000 respondents encouraged the Government to adopt "measures that keep platforms accountable for the harms" [9].

Their effectiveness also depends on whether the user recognises the harm, understands the available controls and believes that using them will change what appears next. Self-management is therefore an important protective layer, but it cannot substitute for safer platform design.

"[I] deleted social media at a later stage in secondary school because **I observed that I was becoming more obsessed with whether or not people liked my content**, and how to present myself online."



- Rheanna, 23

One of the most significant concerns continues to be youth disengagement from mainstream platforms and movement towards less regulated spaces [10]. However, our findings reflect that the primary coping strategy is self-regulation of each person's feeds, with some youth even taking breaks from social media platforms when they observe that their behaviour is excessively dictated by their interactions on the platform.

02 Harms on Social Media

(B) What were youths' responses to harms on social media

The responses from this study indicate that most youth are generally wary of harms and will consequently choose to avoid engaging with them as far as possible. It is worth noting that there remains a segment of youths who recognise that content is harmful, but choose to engage with it anyway.

One of the older youth respondents, Elijah (aged 26), shared his experience of using 4chan during his secondary school days because it was a major source of popular meme culture at the time. The platform was heavily unregulated — users could regularly access explicit and graphic sexual or violent content, and were encouraged to participate in misogynistic, racist or discriminatory discourse. Elijah shared that **"it was normal at that time"**, and that he was influenced by the content that he viewed and participated in. However, he no longer shares those views because of later the positive influence from his friends.

Elijah also emphasised that through the years of being on social media, he has noticed that the harms which exist today were already apparent ten or more years ago. This indicates that an active review of the landscape of online harms and measures protecting against them is necessary to prevent the harms from becoming too normalised.

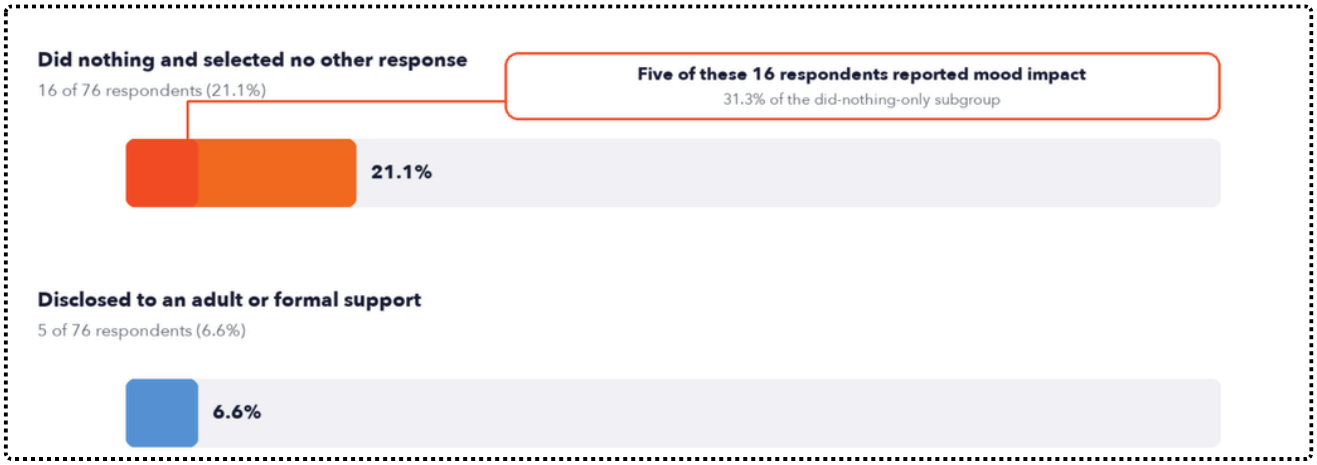


Source: Mojo_cp from Canva Images

02 Harms on Social Media

(B) What were youths' responses to harms on social media

More extreme forms of harmful-content exposure may raise separate concerns around online radicalisation. Recent cases in Singapore illustrate the speed at which such radicalisation can occur, with experts warning that social media algorithms and online communities may accelerate exposure to extremist content. Over the past decade, 23 youths aged 14 to 20 have been dealt with under the Internal Security Act for terrorism-related activities [11].



Source: Harm-exposed survey respondents (n=76), but we have highlighted the minority responses who did not opt to report it to the platforms.

As indicated above, about a fifth of the respondents who reported experiencing harm did nothing. While this is a minority of respondents who did not opt to report the harm to platforms, this segment also indicated a clear negative impact on mood afterwards. Inaction may reflect confidence that the experience was manageable, but it may also reflect uncertainty, habituation, low trust or a belief that disclosure would not help. Research on cyber victimisation has similarly found that young people may remain silent because they expect to manage the situation themselves, do not trust available support or fear making the situation worse [12]. Longitudinal research also indicates that seeking support can be associated with lower subsequent victimisation [13].

02 Harms on Social Media

(B) What were youths' responses to harms on social media

There is no doubt that there are support systems currently available to youth, but the pressing issue seems to be whether these **systems are able to guide youth** to find a solution that is **safe, useful and proportionate to their needs**. A parent or teacher who responds by removing access will unintentionally make youth more wary about sharing. While removing the source of the harm completely eliminates the risk to the youth, it also creates a separate consequence for the youth's social capital or unnecessarily heightens paranoia when engaging with this key piece of social infrastructure in the future. When access is revoked, it also assigns blame to the youth for not making the "right" decision to disengage earlier. As mentioned above, inaction could often be the consequence of uncertainty, or a mistaken overconfidence in their ability to manage, or just low trust in the support systems. This implied assignment of blame then doubly penalises the youth and increases the likelihood that they would be unwilling to share about their future experiences.

The key to approaching harm mitigation for youths is to ensure that youths feel that they can **learn how to protect themselves**. Creating environments where youths feel comfortable sharing what they view and engage with online is crucial not only to ensuring early intervention but also to encouraging a diversity of ideas and perspectives. This is more likely to result in the formation of new opinions, and hopefully, different paths being taken.

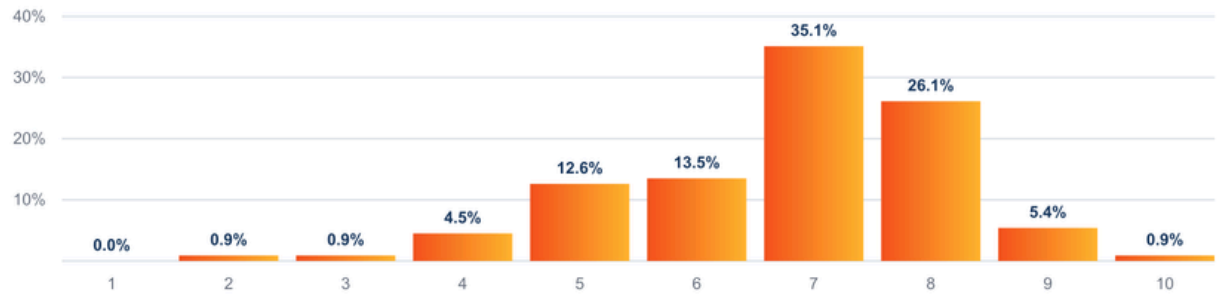
This is also a good juncture to draw back to how user experience is shaped by platform design. Research on online information exposure similarly suggests that platform architecture and user choice operate interactively: platforms structure the pathways of exposure, while user behaviour determines which pathways are reinforced [14]. It may be a bit of a chicken-and-egg dilemma, but strengthening platform design reduces risk.

02 Harms on Social Media

(C) Concluding thoughts

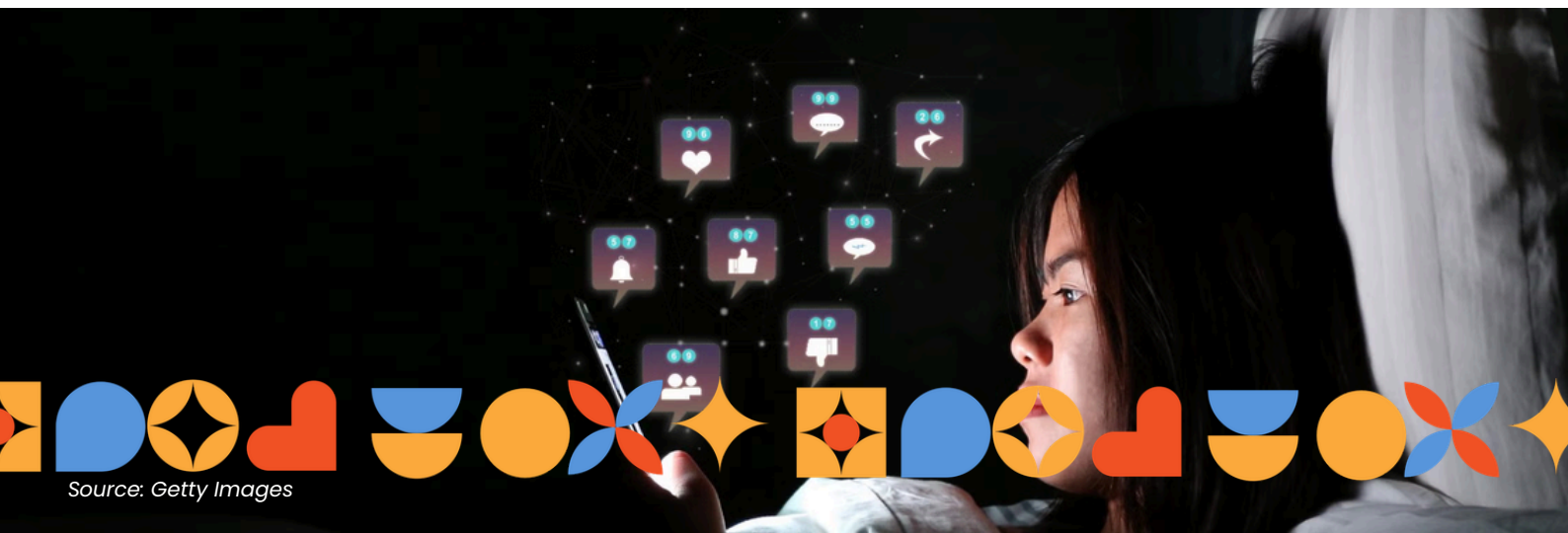
In the survey, 68.5% of respondents reported experiencing at least one form of harm in the past month. Yet the median rating of respondents' overall social-media experience was 7 out of 10, with 67.6% rating it between 7 and 10. Even among respondents who reported harm, 63.2% still gave a rating within this range.

Overall social media experience



Source: Survey Responses (n=111)

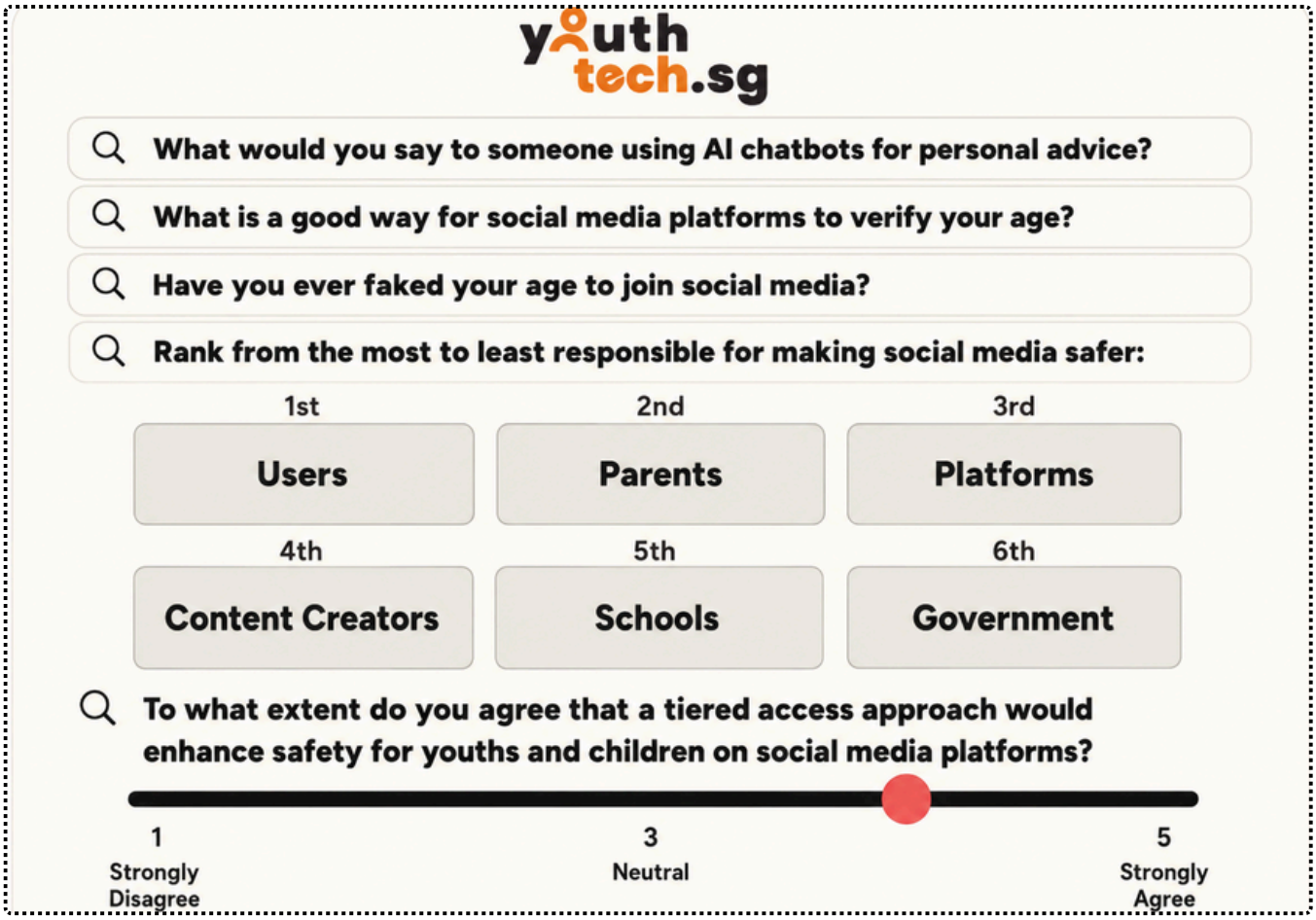
This contradiction highlights why youths may continue using social media despite recognising its risks: the same platforms that expose them to harmful content can also provide entertainment, information, social connection and access to communities. This also re-emphasises the key role that youth play in navigating harms. They must be able to effectively identify the harms, and then exercise autonomy and discretion to reduce the harm. Solutions from the ecosystem must empower good decision-making.



Source: Getty Images

03 Responsibility within the Ecosystem

In the second phase of our ground-sensing, the questions were designed to specifically investigate who youths believe is responsible for managing harms on the social media platforms. The design was most obvious in the Phase 2 street interviews, where respondents were asked to rank six actors from most to least responsible for making social media safer, before explaining the reasoning behind their choices. A modified version was given to the Phase 2 FGD participants, who only completed the exercise after reflecting on their own experiences using social media from early adolescence. Collectively, the results provide an indication of how respondents understood the respective roles of youth, parents, platforms, government, schools and content creators.

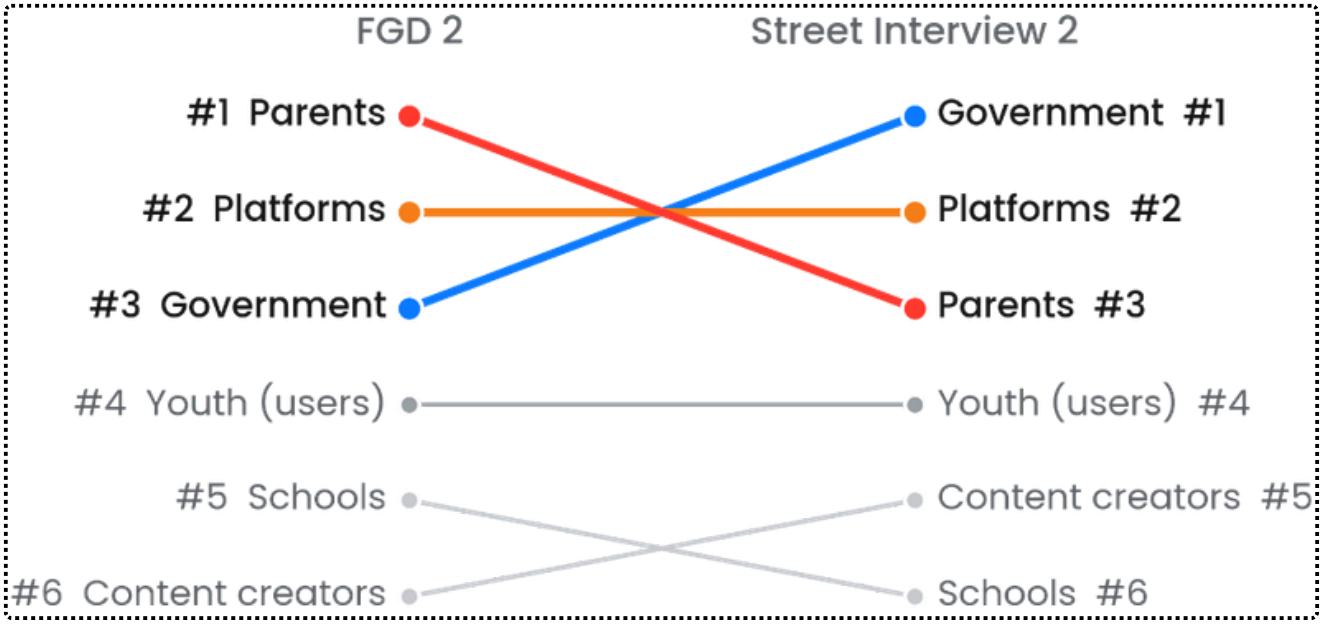


Pictured: The questionnaire design for Phase 2 Street Interviews, where respondents could rearrange the ranking of the six actors as part of their qualitative response

03 Responsibility within the Ecosystem

Before examining the results, it is useful to note the age differences across the Phase 2 qualitative methods. FGD participants were predominantly aged 21–23 and were mostly university students, while Street Interview respondents were largely aged 13–17 and still in secondary school.

Responsibility Ranking in the Ecosystem

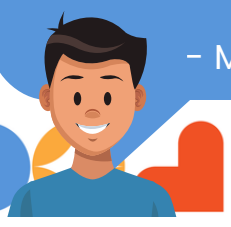


Pictured: The comparative rankings of the different stakeholders in the ecosystem according to youth in FGD 2 and Street Interview 2

Both groups of respondents believed that youth were responsible, although not as much as the government, platforms and parents. It is a positive signal that youth understand their contribution in shaping culture on social media requires active participation, even though, under the status quo, the majority prefer to engage more passively. In a later sentiment-gathering exercise, it may be worthwhile investigating what can move youth from one state to the other.

"And the way to make a social media platform, regardless of the presence of rules or laws, **it's ultimately contingent on the behaviour and the decisions made by the users."**

- Matthias, 16



03 Responsibility within the Ecosystem

(A) The role of platforms in the ecosystem

A common thread between the Phase 2 Street Interview and FGD groups' responses is the prioritisation of platforms in second place. One reason for this is that youth believe an inherent social responsibility is owed by the platforms to the users — even if there are users who choose to influence the culture negatively, the platforms still have an obligation to their users to filter for harmful content, or to create avenues where users can take action to report and reduce the proliferation of harm.

> " ... ultimately, it's your service that you're providing. **I feel if your service is unsafe, or it's harmful to other people, then the onus is on you to make it safe... "**
>
> I mean, a lot of platforms are like, oh yeah, I provide the platform, but if the users or the content creators choose to go and make particular content, it's not my fault, that shouldn't be the case. Because the platform is your responsibility to ensure that users are safe on it."



- Felicia, 20



Source: Selfie taken during Sip n' Spill Phase 2 Street Interviews (media release was signed)

03 Responsibility within the Ecosystem

(A) The role of platforms in the ecosystem

The youth do understand that there will inevitably be trade-offs inherent in the business model. This respondent's interview response indicates that the addictive nature of social media is the status quo, because the platforms need to continuously engage users in order to stay competitive and generate profit.



"...Ultimately the platforms are designed to be very addictive right. Dopamine induced. But ultimately that is their rice bowl in the sense that that's how they make money. **So ultimately if there is no consensus on how this is going, they can make the social media however they want and people will just buy into it... that's why we have a lot of super young and super old being very addicted...**"

- Matthew, 28

The overall sensing is that youth do not expect platforms to remove all harmful content, as that would be an onerous burden on the platform, and could lead to over-sanitising which stifles the natural culture that emerges from users being on the platforms. All they hope for is that the platforms will take measures that reduce the inherent risk they face online, which will also protect more vulnerable users across different age groups. This will be elaborated upon in the following section.



Source: AI-generated image of Singaporean youth doomscrolling

03 Responsibility within the Ecosystem

(B) Should it be the parents or government first?

The clearest divergence in the responses from the Street Interviews and FGDs is whether governments or parents should be more responsible.

Parents are the most proximate to youth in their lived experience

This was especially salient during the Phase 2 FGDs, where the participants began with a reflection of their experience when they first joined social media. A lot of the lived experience often included anecdotes about screen time controls implemented by the parents, and what their experiences were like over the years. While our findings reflect that parents may not be the first port of call for help to manage online harms, the youth definitely see them as a key point of contact as they provide first access to devices.

Governments seem to be "all-powerful" to younger segments of youth

During the Phase 2 Street Interviews, the youths who shared that the government ought to be responsible placed emphasis on the government's soft power to convince the platforms to take action. They understand that as profit-motivated actors, platforms may be unable to make a decision that is clearly unfavourable to their interests. They hope that the soft power exerted by the government may be more effective in lobbying platforms, and to find a middle ground that both youth and platforms can abide by.



Source: @singaporemddi on Instagram

03 Responsibility within the Ecosystem

(C) Concluding thoughts

Looking beyond the rankings, respondents associated each actor with a different form of responsibility based on what they were best placed to influence. The call to action for each is different, and will be summarily addressed in the final section on recommendations as well.

This would also be a pertinent opportunity to address the youth sentiment expressed during the CNA Talking Point (National Day Rally) Special Episode. A small group of 14-16 year-old youths were polled on which actor they felt was the most responsible for governing harms, and the results showed that they felt users would still be the most responsible, followed by parents and platforms.

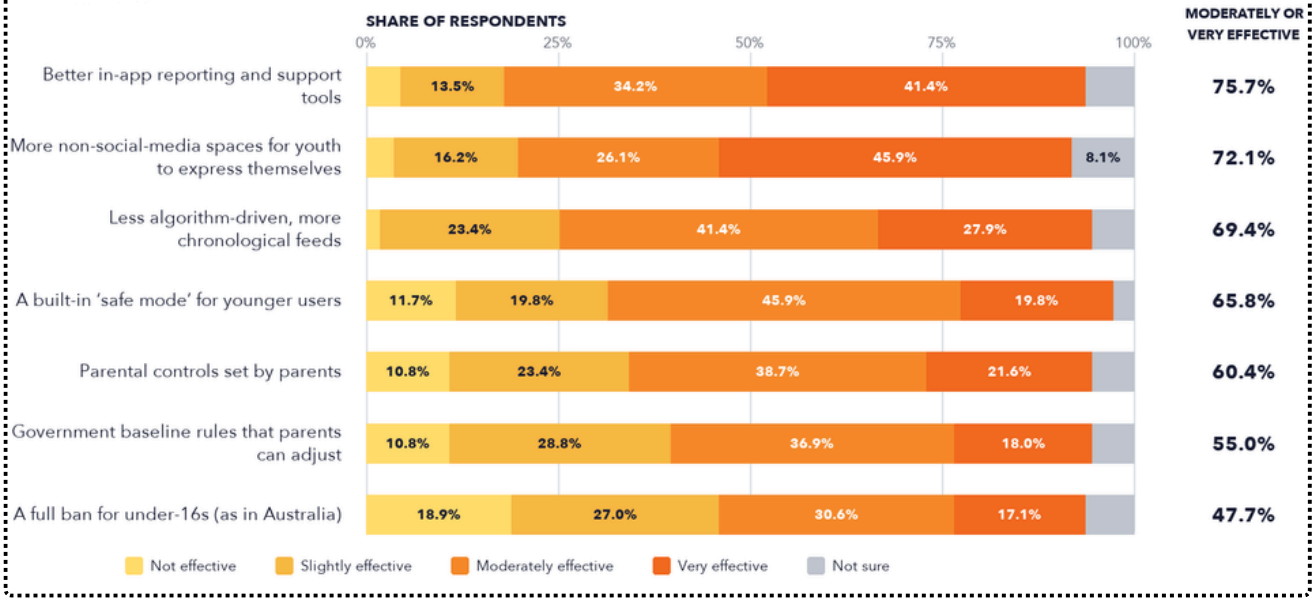
With no additional elaboration on the reason for the ranking, this at the very least reflects an admirable quality about this generation of youth users — there is no deflection of responsibility, and instead a clear recognition of the part they also play in the ecosystem. However, this brings to the forefront an important clarification: **shared responsibility is not necessarily equal responsibility.**

Youth certainly play a role by seeking out support systems and communicating their needs openly. However, other actors within the ecosystem hold the power to address systemic flaws and make online spaces safer by design, alongside offering the lived experience needed to help youth make informed choices. Safeguarding young users therefore cannot remain an individual burden; it demands collective accountability where every stakeholder acts within their distinct sphere of influence.

04 Evaluating Support for Proposed Measures

Respondents were asked to rate the perceived effectiveness of seven proposed measures for addressing social media harms. The results show that support was not uniform across the measures, with respondents distinguishing between interventions they considered useful in principle and those they believed would be effective in practice.

Perceived Effectiveness for proposed measures



Source: Survey Respondents (n=111)

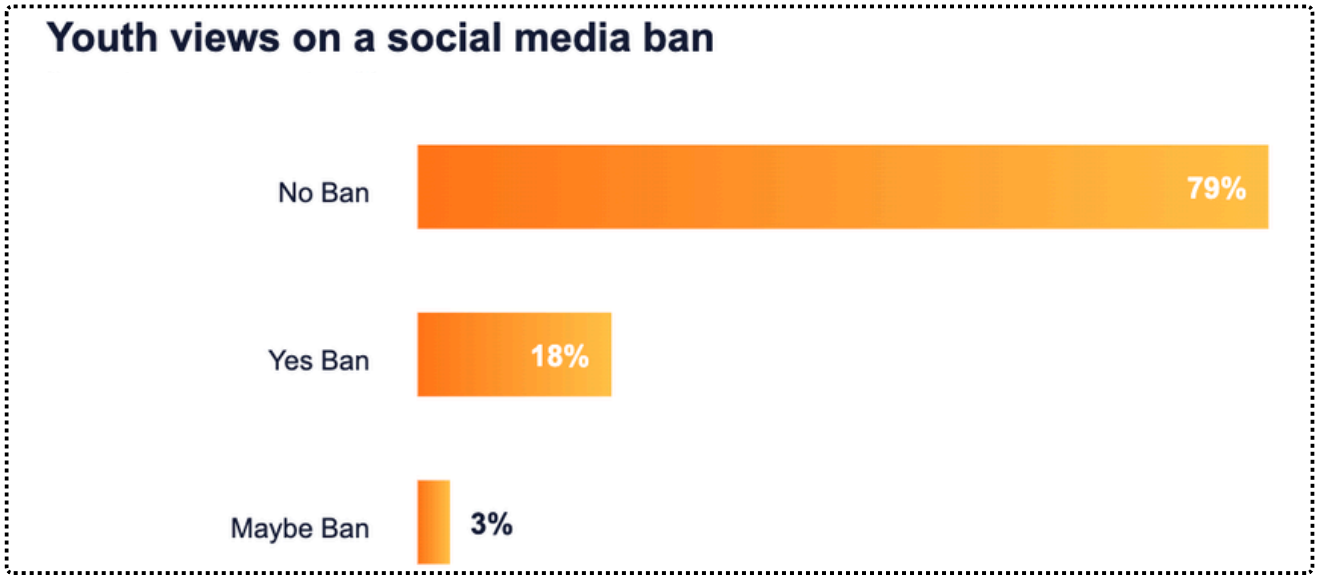
Respondents generally perceived measures that made the online environment safer or provided alternatives and support as more effective than a full restriction of access. A full ban for those under 16 received the greatest proportion of "not effective" responses.

In-app reporting and support tools, along with the provision of more non-social-media spaces attracted particularly strong assessments of effectiveness. Other measures, including safe modes, parental controls and changes to content feeds, generally fell between these positions.

04 Evaluating Support for Proposed Measures

(A) Social media bans

When the idea of social media bans were raised, the overwhelming response was that bans would not be effective in protecting youth from the harms of social media.



Source: Data from FGD Phase 1 and 2 (n=39). The sample size for this item is smaller than overall FGD attendance, reflecting only recorded responses.

A concern that was repeatedly raised was the cliff effect of banning at an early stage, which does not equip youth with the necessary discretion and agency to navigate through harms when given full access [15]. Youth also placed heavy emphasis on the fact that the harms was a by-product of bad online etiquette, and that the issue is just amplified by social media platforms.

"[I] disagree with an outright ban on social media as **I feel that people need to talk about issues instead of hiding problems**."



- Jonathan, 28

04 Evaluating Support for Proposed Measures

(A) Social media bans

There were youths who supported a partial ban which resembled time-based restrictions, but not an overall ban on social media as well.



"**Supportive of social media ban during lessons in school but in the middle on whether to ban break times.** Don't believe in complete ban of social media."

- Jonah, 18

The youth who supported the bans wholly brought up the benefits of reducing unrealistic comparisons with others and preventing harmful content or brainrot from being shared with impressionable youths. One of the respondents shared a unique perspective on why she preferred the bans to varied restrictions:



"**[I] prefer a blanket ban for all rather than selective restrictions to prevent bias or unfairness.** While some youth may be more [mature] than others, most Singaporeans grow up the same way anyway having a very common system of values in pri/sec/tertiary education, so it is safer to ban social media as a whole as the negative exceeds the positives."

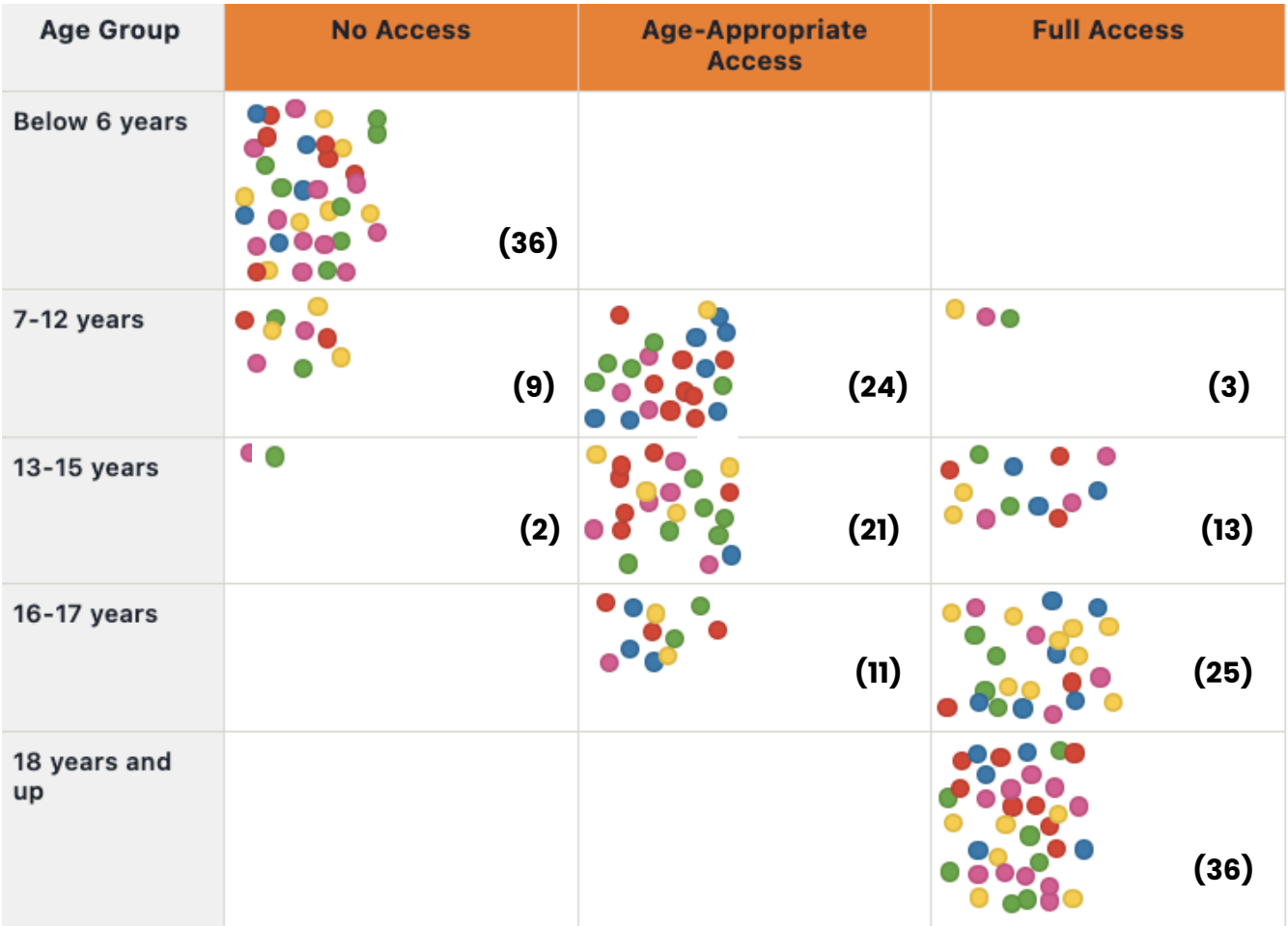
- Hailey, 19

There was also a significant number of youths who did not believe that the ban would be effective, but strongly encouraged regulation that would help to protect youth on these platforms. This will be continued in the next sub-section.

04 Evaluating Support for Proposed Measures

(B) Age-tiered access

In Australia and Malaysia, governments have fined platforms like Meta for allowing access to the platform before youths are of age [16]. The 2026 National Day Rally indicated that the Singaporean government takes a similar position, qualifying that youths under 13 years old should not be allowed platform access [17].



Pictured: Digital recreation of how respondents from Phase 2 Street Interviews voted for age-tiered access to social media

Youth respondents generally favoured a graduated approach to social media access, with stronger restrictions for younger children, age-appropriate access through adolescence, and full access by adulthood.

04 Evaluating Support for Proposed Measures

(B) Age-tiered access

We have created a summary of the sentiment from youth based on the data points above.

Age band	Data from the board	Remarks
Below 6	No access	Unanimous decision
7–12	Split between No Access, Age-Appropriate and Full Access.	Majority voted for age-appropriate access
13–15	Age-Appropriate, with a rising minority favouring Full Access	One outlier: a group of two 13-year-olds rated their own age band Full Access
16–17	Leans Full Access, but a minority still says Age-Appropriate	Respondents seem to be split along the threshold of whether youths are old enough to be responsible
18+	Full access	Unanimous decision

These placements should not be taken as an endorsement of specific age-access restrictions without further consultation.

The exercise was intended to sense respondents' views on what levels of access they considered workable and realistic to enforce across different age groups. Some referred to the ease of circumventing age restrictions or the social expectation of being on social media by adolescence.



"Practically everybody will be on Instagram at [13-16]..."

- Matthew, 28

04 Evaluating Support for Proposed Measures

(B) Age-tiered access

How the respondents determined "readiness" also relied on factors like perceived cognitive maturity, while others relied on legal or societal age thresholds. Others located the risk in platform design rather than age, citing features such as algorithmically amplified content as dangerous to youth.

In a similar vein, some respondents also identified that age-appropriate access necessitated stronger parental guidance. While this sentiment does not directly indicate the age at which youths should be given access to social media, it suggests an alternative understanding of age-appropriate access: full access with appropriate guidance, enabling youths to exercise sound judgement over the content they engage with and consume.

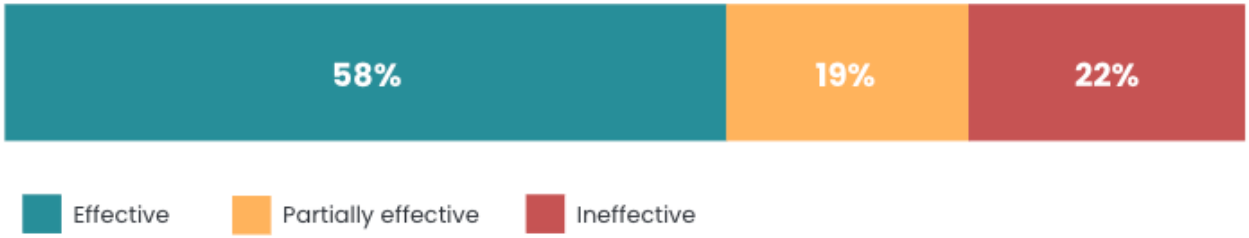
This sentiment aligns with the responses from the youth segment in CNA's Talking Point (Post-National Day Rally) episode, where the 14-16 year olds unanimously voted that adults should trust teens to manage their social media usage.



Source: CNA (2026) "Talking Point live: A post-National Day Rally 2026 special" on YouTube.

05 Evaluating Effectiveness of Age-Tiered Measures

Among participants in the Phase 2 street interviews, **77% of youths** considered age-tiered access at least partially effective.



Source: Phase 2 Street Interviews (n=36) (Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding.)

Youths considered continued online access crucial. Youths saw the tiered approach as a middle ground between a full ban and unrestricted access. It also gives youths room to explore, experiment and learn online, with more freedom as they grow older. This respects their autonomy instead of assuming that youths cannot make their own choices.



"It's like a progression ladder...
[we] are also able to learn [about] the internet along the way."

- Parker, 21



Source: iStock, "A teenager using his phone at night" (adapted from CNA)

05 Evaluating Effectiveness of Age-Tiered Measures

However, support was conditional. Youths believed age-tiered measures should support guided autonomy, enabling us to explore and learn online with appropriate safeguards rather than excluding us altogether. Support fell when tiers felt arbitrary, intrusive or easy to bypass. Across our conversations, three recurring conditions emerged as essential to securing young people's support.

Participants' confidence depended on three conditions:

1. Proportionate implementation;
2. Privacy-preserving verification; and
3. Complementary education or alternatives

One participant captured a recurring concern among youths: blanket restrictions feel less like protection and more like collective punishment.

"Why am I getting punished for **other people's bad behaviour** when I had nothing to do with it? ... The government shouldn't be taking [social media] away from us, but should be working with the platforms to **put restrictions for different age groups**."



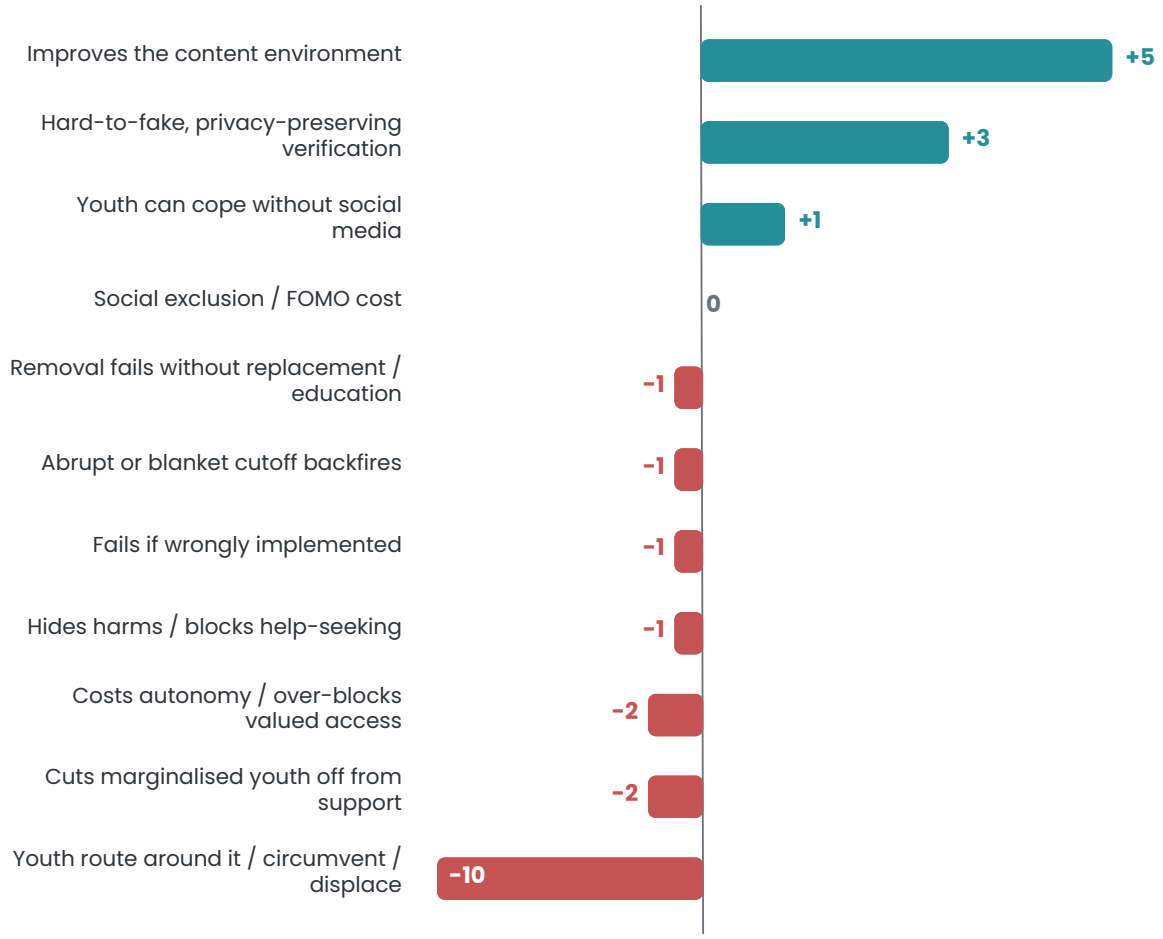
- Samantha, 16

05 Evaluating Effectiveness of Age-Tiered Measures

(A) Proportionate Implementation

When tiers felt unfair or overly restrictive, some participants said they would be more likely to misstate their age, borrow accounts or seek other workarounds. **On the whole, youths more strongly supported measures that made digital environments safer rather than simply restricting access.**

Perceived strengths and limitations of age-based restrictions



Source: Phase 2 Focus Group Discussions (n=36)

Circumvention was the dominant practical concern, receiving a net score substantially greater in magnitude than any other concern.

05 Evaluating Effectiveness of Age-Tiered Measures

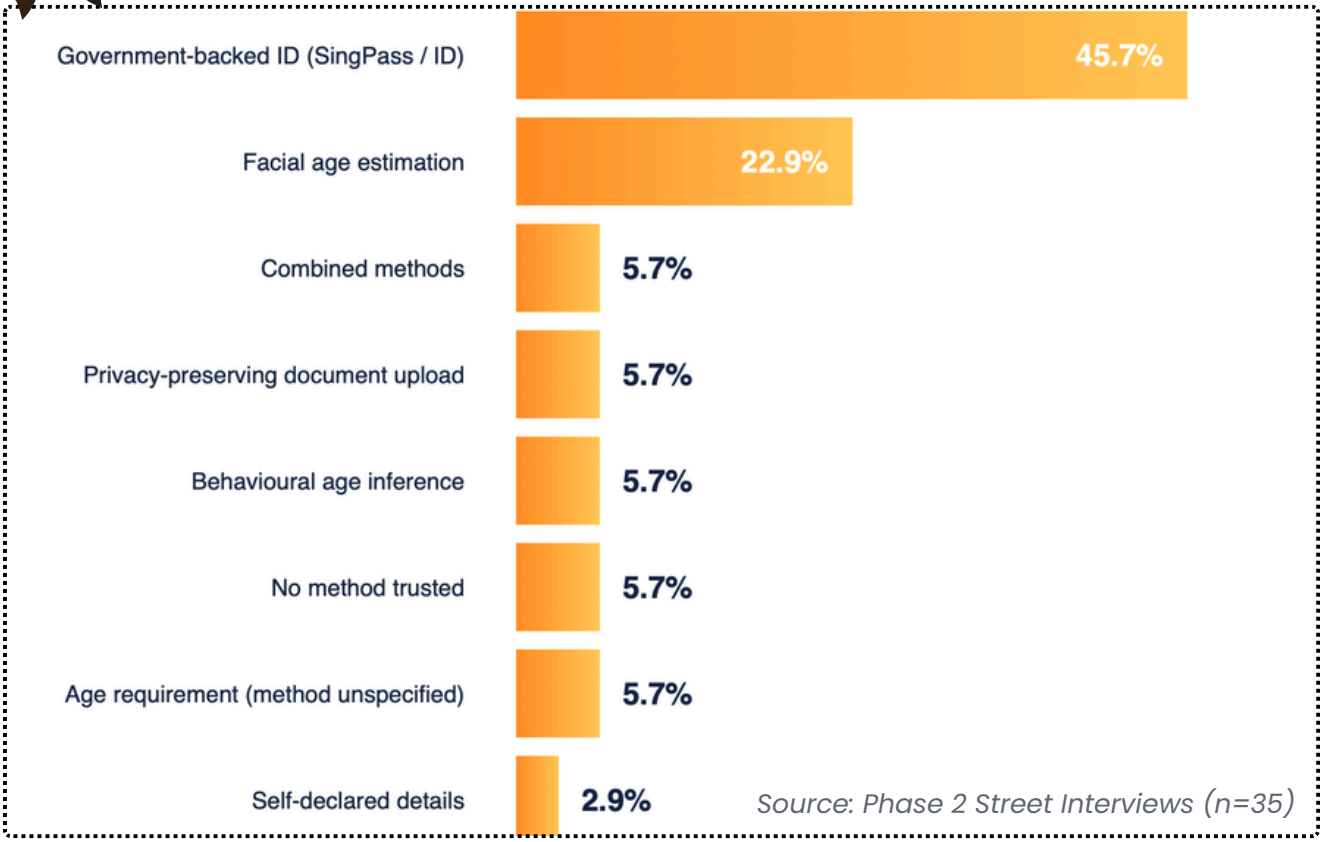
(B) Privacy-Preserving Verification

Minimum-age rules only work if users' ages can be assessed reliably. Australia's independent Age Assurance Technology Trial offers three practical tests: age assurance should be accurate, proportionate to the risk and privacy-preserving [18]. Singapore youths echoed the same priority: verify age without collecting more personal data than necessary.

"You can give them documents, **but blur out those details that are too personal**—like your passport number... if you don't want to disclose it."



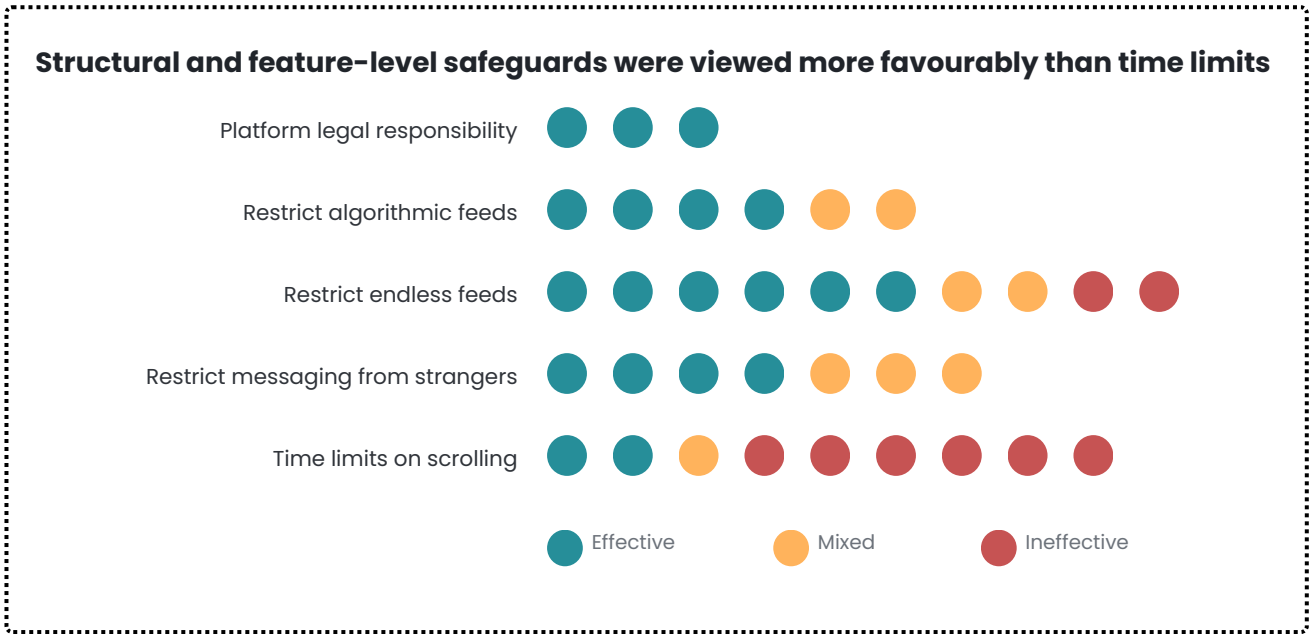
- Margaret, 16



Source: Phase 2 Street Interviews (n=35)

05 Evaluating Effectiveness of Age-Tiered Measures

(C) Complementary Education and Alternatives



Source: Phase 2 Focus Group Discussion (n=12)

Ultimately, age-tiered access should be one layer of support, not a standalone solution. Participants recognised that online safety is shaped by both individual behaviour and the wider social and cultural environment. Age-tiered measures should therefore sit within a broader system of safeguards, education and offline support.

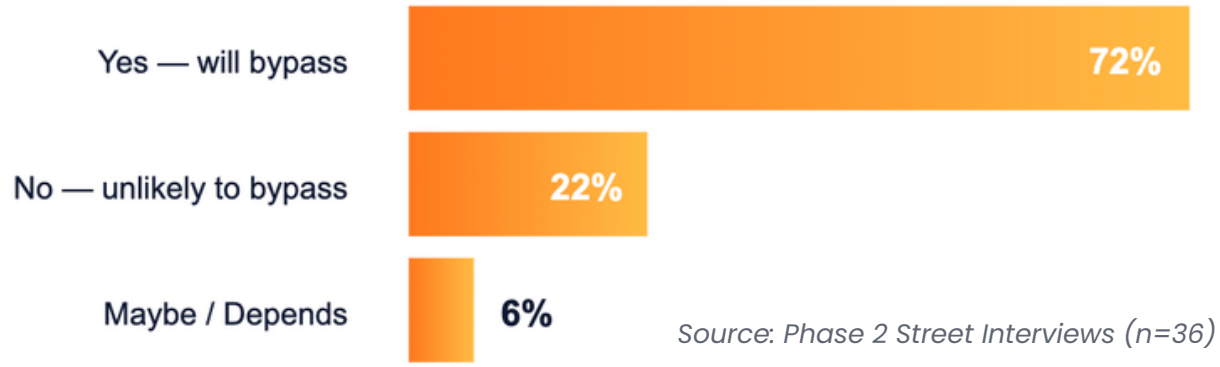
"[I]t would be great if schools in Singapore can be responsible for teaching youths how to navigate the tech space."



- Rebecca, 16

05 Evaluating Effectiveness of Age-Tiered Measures

(D) Bypassing age assurance measures



Phase 2 Street Interview data indicated that many youth have faked their age in order to join social media. Many attribute it to FOMO (fear of missing out) when the rest of their friends were online, and that they would be willing to put their falsified adult age in order to have more "relaxed" access. This is "very normalised" because "there is nothing stopping you [from faking your age]", according to the respondents.

This foreshadows that age-tiered access may face difficulties in implementation — **if the rules or regulations put in place restrict the features available to the youth restrict the features available to youths and, as a result, ruin the experience and are more likely to be bypassed.**

> "It'll be effective to a certain point … people will always find a way to bypass it … **if [the government] tries to add more rules, it makes people more sneaky**."



- Mark, 16

Interestingly, youths did not suggest moving to less regulated platforms as a result of excessive regulation on certain platforms.

06 Recommendations

Social media has become a playground for older youths. Like any playground, safety is a shared responsibility.

A playground is not just an empty space. It is built to safety standards, designed with care, and supported by the community around it. We believe the digital space should work in the same way.



06 Recommendations

01 Build it safely



A physical playground is built to safety standards, with equipment, structures and surfaces designed with safety in mind.

Similarly, social media platforms should meet a reasonable baseline of protection, supported by clear governance and regulation.

02 Be there when we fall



Parents cannot prevent every difficult experience. Young people will sometimes "fall" online, just as children sometimes fall at a playground. What matters is a trusted environment where young people can turn to their parents or caregivers for support.

03 Equip youths to navigate it



Young people also have responsibilities. They want the skills and confidence to recognise harms, make good judgements and contribute to a healthier online culture.

Cyber wellness education should reflect the realities they face online.

06 Recommendations

This is what the respondents hope that each part of the ecosystem can do. Just like a physical playground, a safer digital space depends on a combination of safeguards — from the environment itself, to the presence of trusted adults, to the skills and responsibility of young people.

Government	FROM **Regulate more.**	TO **Co-create practical solutions with young people** – measures they can understand, trust and are likely to abide by.
Platforms	FROM **Modify their platform design.**	TO **Design for safety by default** – reduce features that amplify harm (e.g. algorithmic feeds, infinite scrolling) and give users and families meaningful safety tools.
Parents	FROM **Be more involved.**	TO **Check in, not check on.** Understand their experience and motivations, and keep communication open rather than simply monitoring their habits.
Schools	FROM **Teach more so youth know how-to.**	TO **Teach for real situations** – provide concrete and specific education on what harmful content looks like, where to go for help and how to respond.
Youth	FROM **Take ownership.**	TO **Equip and trust young people** to navigate risks – support one another and contribute to a healthier online culture.

Annex A

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Annex A

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