

Under-18s may be blocked from social media sites that don't meet safeguards

Blocking will apply to platforms that are not child-safe, says Josephine Teo at forum

Sarah Koh

While blocking social media access for those aged under 18 is not an ideal outcome for Singapore, the Government is prepared to do so if platforms fail to have the necessary safeguards.

Blocking will apply to platforms that are not child-safe, while platforms that have safeguards can continue to operate, said Minister for Digital Development and Infor-

mation Josephine Teo.

"It is potentially a differentiated landscape where some platforms have made it possible for child-safe access and continue to offer access to those under 18, but there may be other services that either have not been willing or able to do it," she said during a forum discussion on July 17.

Platform providers will also need to take direct responsibility for design features that will ultimately impact users, said Teo, who cited

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MINISTER FOR DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT AND INFORMATION JOSEPHINE TEO, who cited varying social media access based on age – children under a certain age cannot use social media, while older children can access more features with guidance.

recommendations from experts to restrict features like video autoplay.

"Safety is not just what you get to see or hear on these platforms – it is a question of how often you are persuaded to stay on... the kind of interactions that may be enabled through the platform."

Jointly organised by the Ministry of Digital Development and the Information and Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the forum's discussions centred on online safety for children. Panellists included researchers, community partners, and policymakers from Singapore, Australia and New Zealand.

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This could mean varying access based on age: Children under a certain age cannot use social media, while older children can access more features with guidance.

Tiered access that provides targeted friction is what youth prefer over broad restrictions, said Youth-TechSG chief executive Ben Chua, citing an internal survey of 166 young people in Singapore.

"Many participants were con-

cerned about the cliff effect: if access is delayed too long, young people may eventually enter online spaces without the gradual exposure, judgment and support needed to navigate them well," he said.

"They understand that social media may not be the best environment for early adolescence, but they recognise that online communities now play a core role in youth culture, belonging and identity."

Australia's move to block users under 16 from accessing social media should not be viewed as a blanket ban, but as a time delay for children to develop real-world connections and build digital literacy skills, said fellow panellist Sarah Fox, acting executive manager for Australia's eSafety Commissioner.

Fox said that while there has been a decrease in the number of social media accounts held by Australians under the age of 16 following the move, there is still a "substantial" number of such accounts.

"But social media minimum age is just one tool among many that are available for the Australian government through our regulatory approach," said Fox.

"If we are really serious about creating safer online environments for young people, the response must be layered, holistic and systemic, and built on a foundation of safety by design."

A sweeping solution like a ban solves who is allowed through the door, but does not change the kind of product that sits behind the door, said Dr Chew Han Ei, associate director of impact at Singapore Management University.

"A young person does not become immune to persuasive design, harmful recommendations, or unwanted contact from strangers on a particular birth date," said Chew, who is also an adjunct senior research fellow at IPS.

"We need to examine the features that shape their experiences – recommendation systems, autoplay, infinite scrolling... default privacy and contact settings that may expose younger users to strangers. These are all design choices and can be changed."

James Tan, chief executive of Touch Community Services, also likened the need for stronger digital infrastructure and guidance to school zones, which have dedicated crossings, signage and road safety practices that are taught from a young age.

"A child-safe social media should not depend on children protecting themselves from systems designed by adults," said Tan.

To achieve a child-safe digital space, platforms also need to make their safety guides and parental controls easier to understand and more accessible, said Edward Wee, director of the Infocomm Media Development Authority's Online Communications Office.

sarahkoh@sph.com.sg