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Online gaming escaped Australia's social media ban - but critics say it's just as addictive

1 day ago

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Australia correspondent, Perth



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Critics say gaming platforms should be included in Australia's ban on social media for under-16s. Wednesday afternoons have become a ritual for 15-year-old Sadmir Perviz. It's a circuitous route from home in Perth to the Fiona Stanley Hospital - but it's worth it, he says, to sit down for a game of Dungeons & Dragons with people he may not know but with whom he shares a great deal in common.

Sadmir and his board game companions are just some of the 300 patients at the gaming disorder clinic, Australia's only publicly-run institution of its type, helping patients wean themselves off excessive online gaming habits.

The room where they meet is a simple space in a faceless hospital but in the corner, there's a pile of boardgames on a chair. Jenga, Uno and Sushi Go are also popular choices at the informal group which is attended by both patients and clinicians.

It's a bit of a departure for the 15-year-old who until a couple of months ago preferred to play games with friends online for 10 hours a day.

"It feels completely different," says Sadmir. "You get to roll the dice instead of clicking a button. You can interact with people, so you actually know who's there rather than just being on a call with random people."

Dr Daniela Vecchio, the psychiatrist who set up the clinic, says that while gaming isn't bad in itself, it can become a problem - an addiction even.

Gaming platforms and social media pose similar risks for children: excessive time spent online, and potential exposure to predators, harmful content or bullying.

So she wonders why gaming platforms have not been included in Australia's "world-first" social media ban for under-16s.

The ban, which came into force on Wednesday, is supposed to prevent teens from having accounts on 10 social media platforms including Instagram, Snapchat and X. Children will still be able to access platforms like YouTube and TikTok, but without accounts.

For Vecchio, the omission of gaming platforms is odd.

"It doesn't make much sense," she says.

"Gaming and social media are so interconnected, it's very difficult to separate.

"The individual who plays games for excessive amounts of time also spends excessive amounts of time on social media platforms where they can see other gamers or can live stream gaming, so it's a way to connect."



Dr Daniela Vecchio runs Australia's only publicly funded clinic for gaming disorder clinic. Sadmir, for example, spent much of his time on the gaming platform Steam, as well as YouTube. Dr Vecchio singles out the platforms Discord and Roblox as particular worries - a concern echoed by many experts and parents the BBC has spoken to in covering the ban and its impact.

Both Roblox and Discord have been dogged by claims that some children are being exposed to explicit or harmful content through them and are facing lawsuits relating to child safety in the US.

Roblox introduced new age assurance features in Australia and two other countries weeks before the social media ban kicked in, with the checks due to be rolled out to the rest of the world in January. The checks will "help us provide positive, age-appropriate experiences for all users on Roblox", the company said.

Discord also introduced age checks on some features earlier this year and on Wednesday said it was introducing a new "teen-by-default" setting for all Australian users.

Australia's social media ban for children has left big tech scrambling
Australia is banning social media for kids under 16. How will it work?

The 'wild west of internet usage'

Former gaming clinic patient Kevin Koo, 35, wonders whether a social media ban could have influenced the access he got at a younger age.

"I was growing up in the wild west of internet usage so, there weren't any restrictions," he says. "I got free rein on the internet basically. So I think that for me, the damage has already been done."

A former quantum finance intern interested in AI, Mr Koo lost his job just before the pandemic. Living in Sydney, he had no family nearby and no regular work. He says he lost confidence and ended up consumed by online gaming, likening his experience to substance abuse.

Dr Vecchio agrees with the comparison - if she had her way, she'd be tempted not just to expand the social media ban to gaming but to raise the age to 18.

Gaming disorder is also now recognised by the World Health Organisation as an official diagnosis and, according to a 2022 Macquarie University study, around 2.8% of Australian children are affected by it. Vecchio thinks the number at risk is higher.



Kevin Koo, 35, wonders whether he might have benefited from a social media ban

The Australian government says its ban is about protecting kids from harmful content, cyberbullying, online grooming and "predatory algorithms" among other things – some or all of which could arguably be said to exist with gaming platforms.

The Australia Federal Police are among those who have warned chatrooms on these sites are hotbeds for radicalisation and child exploitation.

But, as the eSafety Commissioner said last month, the legislation enforcing the ban means platforms were not selected according to "safety, a harms or risk-based assessment".

Instead, platforms have been selected according to three criteria: whether the platform's sole or "significant purpose" is to enable online social interaction between two or more users; whether it allows users to interact with some or all other users; and whether it allows users to post.

Exceptions were made for gaming, for example, because its primary purpose is not social-media style interaction.

The law, say some experts, makes no sense.

"It's incompetence, it's reactionary," says Marcus Carter, professor of human-computer interaction at the University of Sydney.

"Social interaction is not a bad thing... There are a bunch of probably legitimate concerns about these big tech platforms and what they are affording children and what they are exposing them to so as a result we've said we are banning social media.

"I just wish the government was trying to figure out how to help rather than put a band-aid on a bullet wound," he says.



Watch: Australia's social media ban explained... in 60 seconds

Tama Leaver, professor of internet studies at Curtin University and chief investigator at the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, also says the ban on social media is too blunt a tool – instead a more nuanced approach is needed, including towards gaming platforms.

"There is such a wide spectrum of gaming from incredibly positive, nurturing, fun, creative, expressive spaces - something like Minecraft comes to mind where it's had so many positive uses." However, platforms like Roblox are at the other end of the spectrum, he says.

"Roblox isn't a game. It's a series of enabling tools for other people to make games. And we know that some of the games that have been made that clearly feel like they're meant for adults have been accessed by very young people."

On Professor Leaver's desk at the university are three plushies with inbuilt ChatGPT inside them. On the box, it says they are suitable for three and above. This, he says, has also gone too far.

"I do think there needs to be age-appropriate regulation," he says, referring to young people going online. "I do think we're at a moment, and it's not just Australia, you look across the EU, there is huge appetite for all sorts of regulation."

A treatment plan, not a cure

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In Mr Koo's case, for example, his vice wasn't just gaming. It was AI chatbots, another feature of online life that has come under scrutiny for everything from making things up to allegedly encouraging children to kill themselves.

There is evidence they are designed to manipulate users into prolonging interactions and their use has even given rise to a new phenomenon called AI psychosis, in which people increasingly rely on AI chatbots and then become convinced that something imaginary has become real.

Mr Koo also started googling his mental health issues and relying on AI to help confirm his diagnoses.

"You're Googling stuff that you think you already know and then you kind of tick the box after that saying, oh, I've already done my work for today, my therapy work with ChatGPT," he says. Mr Koo suffered a psychotic episode and after extensive therapy with a professional, he now takes a different approach.

"I might Google or ChatGPT something and then I'll check it with my therapist in person," he says. "I do think being able to read human emotions and having that face-to-face conversation with someone is completely different."

The government has said it will continually review the list of banned platforms and at the end of November added Twitch, a streaming platform where people typically play video games while chatting to viewers.

Communications Minister Anika Wells also told the BBC last week that the eSafety Commissioner "definitely has her eye on Roblox". And, she said, the social media ban "isn't a cure, it's a treatment plan" that will "always evolve".

WHAT IS THE POLICY?

Children under the age of 16 in Australia are no longer allowed to have social media accounts.

The Australian government says - a world-first policy popular with parents - is aimed at protecting teenagers from harmful content and other risks such as cyberbullying and grooming.

Some young campaigners have argued the ban disregards the rights of children.

The demand for platforms to do better is growing. So too are the queues of families waiting to get help at the gaming disorder clinic, but Vecchio has to turn them away.

"[The legislation] is excluding platforms where children interact with many others and some of them can be people who harm them," says Vecchio. "Children need to be protected, they need to be safeguarded."

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