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In a little corner of Instagram, some young Malay activists in Singapore are using the account @LepakConversations to highlight and unpack Malay/Muslim issues by conducting dialogues both online and offline. It seems that no issue is too awkward or too challenging, and they have discussed the full gamut – from negative Malay stereotypes to challenges facing the Malay community on male mental health. It is a lively space where people engage with diverse perspectives while offering mutual support and validation.

Over on TikTok, 29-year-old Singaporean Andreana Tay has more than nine million views and over one million likes for her top video where she explains how her non-verbal, autistic teen sister adorably asks to share her food through body language, gestures and giggles. Ms Tay's videos have helped to raise awareness of not only the struggles of living with autism, but also the joys and gratifications autistic people experience, humanising rather than diminishing them. Her videos capturing how she cares for her sister have drawn scores of supportive comments, including those from people who also have autistic family members.

And yet, despite such uplifting stories, we hear growing calls worldwide for measures like smartphone bans and social media restrictions for teens. These exhortations typically assert that youth mental health is deteriorating due to growing social media use, and that restricting device and social media use is key to boosting mental wellness. Indeed, there are already campaigns in countries such as the Netherlands, US and Britain for smartphone bans in schools, and the Australian Parliament has just passed a social media ban for children under 16.

But in a technologising world, are bans a sensible or even practicable solution?

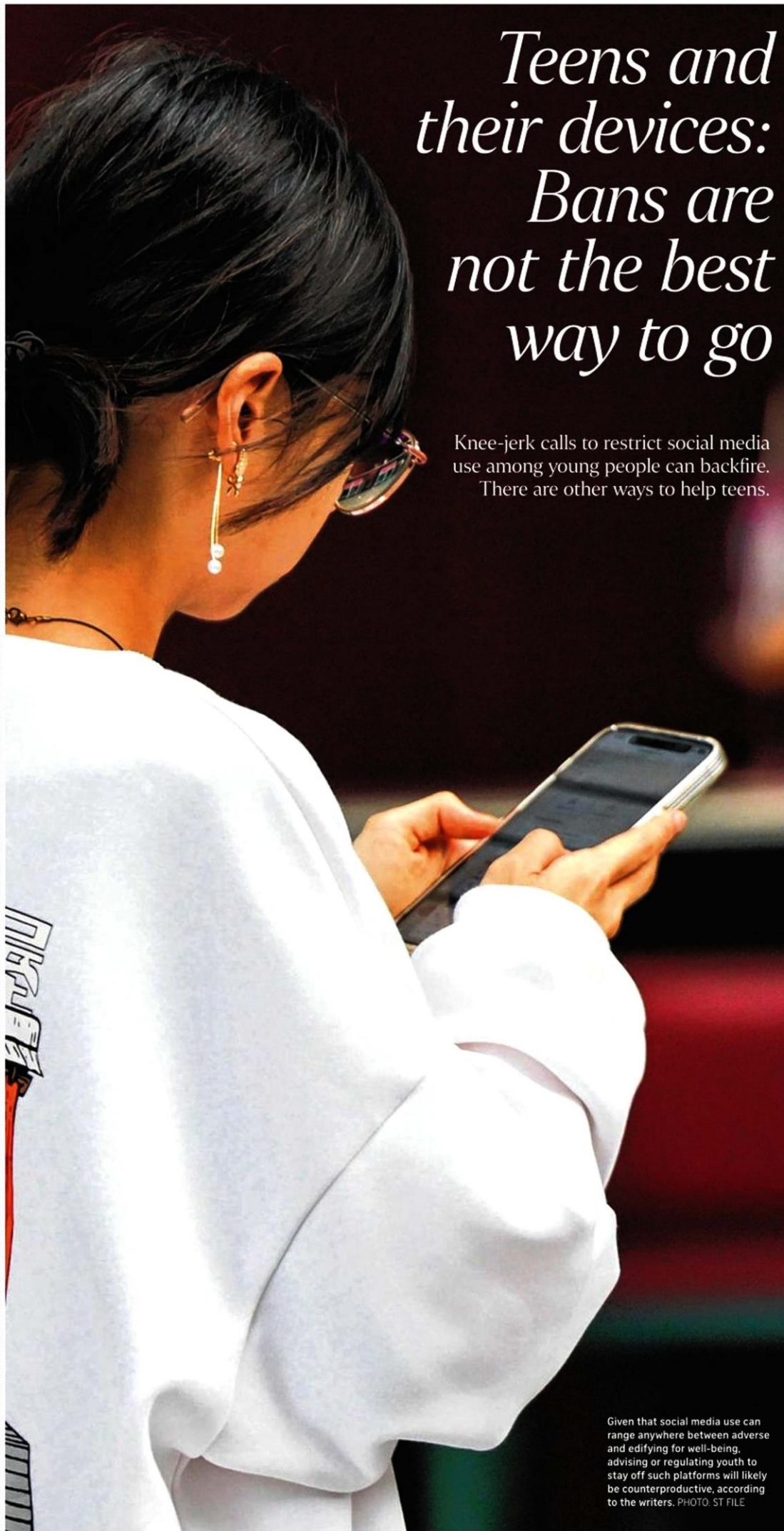
It is how one experiences social media that matters.

With social media use, in particular, concerns tend to revolve around the specific experiences youth encounter on these platforms. Some suffer loss of self-esteem while engaging in negative social comparison with peers. Many have over-consumed algorithmically driven content that harms mental well-being or produced and shared age-inappropriate content that is sexual, violent or extremist in nature. Most recently, Singapore Sports School male students were found to have produced and distributed nude deepfake images of their female schoolmates, stoking considerable anxiety over their misuse of technology. Undoubtedly, such social media experiences have the capacity to harm young people.

However, it is equally important to recognise the positives of social media use. Extensive research has indeed found that many individuals use social media to find connection and community, and to explore their identity and find themselves. A study by the Institute of Mental Health and National University of Singapore of youth aged 15 to 24 found that they use social media to express themselves, meet like-minded people, stay in touch with people they care about, and to empower and affirm one another.

Such benefits are especially important for people who find it difficult to express and explore their identities offline, such as LGBTQ youth, those on the autism spectrum, and those with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). In Singapore, one example is the Unlocking ADHD Support Community on Facebook, where caregivers and individuals share their experiences and provide social support for one another in a welcoming and comforting online space.

Beyond community, research has also shown how specific uses of social media, especially those involving inspiring and meaningful content, can boost people's well-being. Mindfully consuming and thinking about such positive content on social media can help individuals make sense of their lives and reflect on the human condition. Some research has even found that something as mundane as viewing cat videos can enhance daily well-being. Taking into account the varied harms and benefits therefore, there is a critical need to be more nuanced



Teens and their devices: Bans are not the best way to go

Knee-jerk calls to restrict social media use among young people can backfire. There are other ways to help teens.

Given that social media use can range anywhere between adverse and edifying for well-being, advising or regulating youth to stay off such platforms will likely be counterproductive, according to the writers. PHOTO: ST FILE

in our understanding of social media use and its impact, and that lawmakers, parents, educators and youth themselves, should view social media use as a set of experiences that can vary.

THE PROBLEM WITH BANS AND RESTRICTIONS

Given that social media use can range anywhere between adverse and edifying for well-being, advising or regulating youth to stay off such platforms will likely be counterproductive. Blanket bans may sound impactful and enable lawmakers to demonstrate that they are taking decisive action against a perceived threat to society. Yet the devil is in the details. The Australian ban on social media for children below the age of 16 has been met with both praise and condemnation. Whereas some parent advocates

laud the ban as long overdue, academics and counsellors have identified significant problems with this headline measure.

First, even if the social media ban can be effected by platforms through age verification tools, teenagers will likely find ways to circumvent them and be on them regardless. The ban will thus be difficult and resource-intensive to enforce and no clear solutions are forthcoming.

Moreover, bans can shift accountability from platforms to parents since if theoretically, teens are banned from social media, the onus is no longer on platforms to ensure their safety. Parents will then bear the brunt of keeping their kids off social media platforms. Some experts further caution that bans will see youth resort to exploring unregulated online spaces where they will be more vulnerable to

harm given the lack of safeguards on such platforms.

Earlier this year, American psychologist Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* seized global headlines for asserting that social media use is a major contributor to the rising cases of mental health issues faced by youth. However, many other researchers have analysed the relationship between social media use and mental health trends and found little association between them. When associations are noted, they do not indicate that the use of social media predicts or causes depression. Instead, they suggest that young people who already have mental health issues use such platforms more often or in ways that differ from their healthy peers.

We must focus on empowering an intentional experience of

social media. If the evidence propelling device and platform bans for young people is equivocal at best, how should we think more productively about managing their device use and supporting parents in guiding their kids? An alternative approach which focuses on empowering youth to use social media mindfully and purposefully will likely be more effective in enhancing their well-being.

For starters, it is crucial to help teenagers be more conscious of their own motivations and patterns of device use. In the first instance, if youth are finding it hard to get off a social media platform, we may want to focus on the specific reasons driving such behaviour. Basic psychological needs theory suggests that there are three fundamental needs that are crucial for our well-being and

motivation. First, we need autonomy, which means feeling in control of our own actions and decisions. Second, we need competence, or the feeling that we are capable and effective at what we do. Third, we need relatedness, which is the desire to feel connected to others and have meaningful relationships. When these needs are met, we tend to feel happier, more motivated and more satisfied with life. However, when these needs are not satisfied, we experience frustration, stress or disconnection.

Research has found that youth who do not have their psychological needs met may, in turn, spend more time on social media platforms. In such cases, social media use acts as a kind of coping mechanism in an attempt to satisfy unmet needs. Hence, if a teenager feels powerless, incompetent or socially isolated, he or she may turn to platforms like social media or video games to regain that sense of control, competence and connection.

Addressing youth mental well-being and excessive media use thus requires enhancing social environments and structures to better meet these fundamental needs. Creating this supportive environment requires collaboration from everyone – schools, parents and other community members. Small steps may involve giving children more choice in their day-to-day lives, helping them feel greater self-esteem and creating opportunities for genuine connection with family and friends.

In addition to the social environment, social media platform companies also have a responsibility in ensuring that youth experience agency and purpose online. Some platforms implement certain features which encourage young people to use them more than they want to, such as algorithmic recommender systems and default autoplay of unlimited content. Policymakers should consider regulating companies' use of these features to help youth gain greater control over their device use.

Another common feature across many social media platforms is the content feed. Teaching young people to curate their feed into one that most positively benefits them can also help them shape a more personal and mindful way of experiencing social media. This also hones media literacy and critical thinking skills, helping youth be more reflective about the content they encounter.

Instagram has just announced in its blog plans to allow users to reset their feeds, clear recommended content and unfollow accounts as desired. This change is meant to ensure that teens see more appropriate content, offering them "new ways to shape their Instagram experience, so it can continue to reflect their passions and interests as they evolve".

Beyond just consuming online content, content creation is the new frontier as artificial intelligence (AI) deployment accelerates. New content creation tools – especially those powered by generative AI – have proliferated, trivialising the creation of realistic and compelling audio-visual content. Users of all ages will have their skills of discernment tested as they consume, make and share content. But teens in particular may lack the maturity and foresight to understand the ethical implications and legal consequences of engaging in errant online behaviour such as producing deepfakes or engaging in scams. Critical literacy in AI ethics must thus be stepped up.

Ultimately, amidst growing calls to regulate social media use among youth, there is an urgent need to focus on the quality of their online experience and boosting their digital competencies rather than imposing blunt measures like bans and screentime limitations. Understanding the reasons behind the overdependence of youth on social media use and empowering them to purposefully determine their own experiences will be far more effective in addressing their needs. As adults guiding them along this journey, we will do well not to yield to moral panics and resort to seemingly easy solutions.

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