

ACU researchers want to find out if social media is contributing to concerning decline in youth literacy

Youth literacy in Australia is in decline and researchers are concerned that social media is a contributing factor.

Four months on from Australia's world-first laws prohibiting social media use for under 16s, many young people are finding their way around the ban.

Australian Catholic University researchers are attempting to find out just how much social media is still being used among teens by surveying their parents.

Dr Signy Wegener has seen her own child continue to access social media platforms despite government legislation.

"I am a parent of a 13-year-old whose use of social media has not been impacted by the ban, and she reports that many of her friends have had similar experiences," she said.

Research shows that since the pandemic there has been a massive increase in youth social media usage, while at the same time young people are spending less free time on constructive hobbies – such as reading.

Literacy among young Australians is concerningly low, with data showing that one in three Australian children cannot read proficiently, and nearly a third of teens don't read books for pleasure at all.

Dr Wegener, from ACU's Australian Centre for the Advancement of Literacy, said Australian literacy rates have been falling for two decades.

"The results of the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2022 revealed that around 49 per cent of Australian 15-year-olds failed to meet the minimum national proficient standard in reading, a figure that was 16 per cent higher than in 2003," she said.

Dr Wegener and her colleagues are asking parents of 10–15-year-olds about their views and experiences of the Australian Government's under-16s Social Media Ban.

"We are particularly interested in whether it has effectively restricted social media access and impacted their child's time spent reading," Dr Wegener said.

"Luckily my child is already a reader, but I do wonder if it were not for time spent on social media, would they be reading more?"

"I have also heard that the ban has been effective in locking some teens out of their social media. As a scientist this intrigues me, and I wonder what the range of experiences to date have been and what flow-on effects the ban might have had on how young people choose to spend their free time.

"As a literacy researcher, I hope that reading is one of those activities."

ARC Laureate Professor Anne Castles, who is leading a program exploring teenage literacy, said the survey will provide an important baseline for understanding how the ban is working now and how this might evolve over time. It's hoped that this will help with discovering ways to arrest the nation's literacy decline

"Ultimately, it is literacy that allows us to become productive members of society. The direct costs of low literacy to the global economy sum to over \$US1 trillion annually," she said.

"Without that ability, people are limited from acquiring knowledge about hygiene, diet, and safety and low literacy is a major contributor to inequality, and it increases the likelihood of poor physical and mental health.

"The ability to read is transformational."

Take the survey [here](#).

Dr Wegener and Professor Castles are available for interview.

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