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The Age Question: Why Social Media Bans Are Easier to Legislate Than to Enforce

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25 July 2026 ·

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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The Age Question: Why Social Media Bans Are Easier to Legislate Than to Enforce

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a measure demonstrably fails to keep minors off platforms but does succeed in de-anonymising adults, what has the state actually regulated?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Imposing a ban is one thing and enforcing it another. Every age-specific restriction on social media rests on age verification, and verification means identifying real users with real data, which is a privacy cost paid upfront for an enforcement benefit that has not materialised.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This gives you a **GS2 rights-and-regulation** answer with genuine international comparison, and a **GS3 technology governance** answer on platform design. The structure is unusually clean: three jurisdictions have taken three different decisions on the same question, which lets you argue comparatively rather than assertively. It also connects to the Indian privacy jurisprudence you already know.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

JURISDICTION	DECISION
France	Law passed banning social media access for under-15s; will attempt to age-verify every existing account after January 2027
Australia	Already bans under-16s from holding social media accounts, and has begun verification
United Kingdom	House of Commons declined age-specific bans after debate, asking instead for parental supervision
India	Age-specific bans debated by politicians and social activists; no ban in force

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The case for restriction is not frivolous. Credible studies indicate that early exposure may stunt learning ability. **Cyber-bullying** has driven young people to suicide, depression and other mental illness. **Sexual predation** is a real and documented risk, with young users easily targeted. **Engagement syndrome** is a design problem: algorithms built to maximise scrolling are, by construction, time sinks that displace reading, study and sport. Those same algorithms create **filter bubbles**, producing young people fluent in the wars of the Marvel Universe and unaware of those in Ukraine, Gaza or Iran.

The case against turns on enforceability and cost.

Verification is a privacy breach with a speech consequence. Identifying users by real name and data is intrusive in itself. Where the government performs the verification or can access the data, users understand that the state may punish them for content it dislikes. The chilling effect falls on lawful speech, not merely unlawful speech.

Verification does not work. Teenagers are considerably more adept at circumventing online restrictions than adults. The Australian government estimates that most young people who held accounts before the ban retain access, and that minors have found ways to pass verification and register afterwards. Enforceability was a principal reason the UK declined a ban.

Indian conditions make it harder still. Handsets and computers are routinely shared across a household of varying ages, which defeats device-level access control. Restriction on major platforms also risks pushing minors to smaller, less scrutinised services, producing **less** oversight rather than more.

Digital access is now educational infrastructure. Post-pandemic, most children use social media and adjacent resources such as Wikipedia for schoolwork. In Australia, low population density and a tradition of distance learning meant social media was defended as the only social connection available to children in the outback. Imperfect connection is not obviously worse than none.

The unresolved question is autonomy. Adults are permitted choices that harm themselves and sometimes others: they drive lethal vehicles, vote, consume tobacco and alcohol, and take physical risks. At what age should society stop regulating life choices? Should a social media **threshold** track the driving age, the voting age or the drinking age? Different cultures answer differently, and no single figure is defensible across all of them.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use the **three-test frame** familiar from Indian privacy jurisprudence: legality, legitimate aim and proportionality. A ban clears the first two comfortably. It struggles on the third, because proportionality asks whether a less intrusive measure would achieve the aim. If verification is leaky in practice, the state accepts a certain privacy cost for an uncertain protective benefit, which is precisely the trade proportionality is meant to prevent.

A useful second lens is **design regulation versus access regulation**. Access regulation asks who may enter. Design regulation asks what the platform may do once they are inside, addressing engagement-maximising algorithms, default settings and recommendation systems for minors. The second is harder to legislate and far harder to evade.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a gate and a room. **Access regulation** builds a taller gate: verification at entry, age thresholds, penalties. Teenagers climb the gate, or find the side door of a smaller platform. **Design regulation** changes the room: no infinite scroll for minor accounts, no engagement-optimised recommendation, defaults set to protection rather than retention. The gate is visible and politically satisfying. The room is where the harm actually occurs.

WAY FORWARD

- **Regulate design before access.** Obligations on algorithmic recommendation, autoplay and default privacy settings for minor accounts are harder to [circumvent](#) than an age gate.
- **Keep verification off government systems.** If verification is adopted, privacy-preserving [attestation](#) that does not hand identity data to the state limits the speech chill.
- **Account for shared devices.** Any Indian framework built on one-user-one-device assumptions will fail in most Indian households.
- **Invest in digital literacy.** The durable protection against predation, bullying and bubbles is a user who recognises them.
- **Legislate reviewably.** Given the contested evidence, sunset clauses and mandatory review are more defensible than permanent thresholds.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has examined the right to privacy following *K.S. Puttaswamy*, the regulation of social media, and the effects of technology on society. This editorial supplies comparative material across three jurisdictions.

Practice question: “Age-based bans on social media substitute an enforceable-sounding rule for an unenforceable one.” Critically examine, with reference to the proportionality standard. (250 words)

Interview angle: If a measure demonstrably fails to keep minors off platforms but does succeed in de-anonymising adults, what has the state actually regulated?

Sources: Business Standard, PIB

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 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat) [Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/07/bs-social-media-age-verification-minors-2026/>

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