

Four Claims, Four Rebuttals

Premier Kinew's announcement that Manitoba will ban social media for children under 16 years of age contains four arguments popular among ban advocates. But does the evidence support these claims?

CLAIM 1

“These tools have been optimized to hack our children’s reward system in their brain.” – CP24,

April 26 2026

While some platform features, like variable reward notifications and infinite scroll, do exploit well-understood psychological engagement mechanisms, this is not unique to social media. The same features can be found in many games, online shopping apps, streaming services and EdTech. Nor is there evidence their presence on social media causes neurological harm. **Odgers & Jensen (2020)** found that fears about lasting harm to adolescent mental health at the population level are not supported by available science, and **Przybylski & Weinstein (2017)**, in a study of over 120,000 English adolescents, found the relationship between screen time and well-being to be curvilinear rather than linearly harmful, with moderate use showing no detrimental effects. What the evidence and recent court rulings against major social media platforms *do* show is that these features are intentionally designed to maximize engagement at the cost of children’s wellbeing, which in itself infringes on children’s rights. What the evidence supports is regulating the commercial practices that exploit these mechanisms — across all digital platforms, not just the ones a ban would cover.

EVIDENCE: Odgers & Jensen 2020 (doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13190); Przybylski & Weinstein 2017 (doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678438); NPR 2026 (npr.org/2026/03/25/nx-s1-5746125)

CLAIM 2

“These are forces that contribute to anxiety and depression.” – CP24, April 26 2026

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of peer-reviewed research on the impacts of social media on mental health consistently find that associations are absent or weak, inconsistent, and highly context-dependent. This was most recently confirmed by a **2026 umbrella review** of 72 such reviews, which found that general social media use shows weak and inconsistent associations with both well-being and ill-being, while problematic patterns of use — characterized by compulsive, uncontrolled engagement — show more consistent links to ill-being. Crucially, causality and its (potential) direction remain unresolved, with multiple studies suggesting that declining mental health leads to increased social media use, not the reverse. **Vuorre, Orben & Przybylski (2021)**, drawing on three nationally representative datasets covering hundreds of thousands of adolescents, found no overall evidence that digital technology use has become more harmful to adolescents’ mental health over time, with mixed results across specific outcomes that on balance contradict the narrative of an accelerating, social-media-driven crisis. Presenting correlation as settled causation in legislative rationale is not a neutral act.

EVIDENCE: Tølbøll 2026 (doi.org/10.1111/camh.70071); Vuorre et al. 2021 (doi.org/10.1177/2167702621994549); Odgers & Jensen 2020; Valkenburg et al. 2022 (doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.08.017)

CLAIM 3

“They amplify comparisons between yourself and artificial standards.” – CBC, April 27 2026

Concerns about harmful media representations are not new, and they do not begin or end with social media. Scholars including **Bishop (2018)** and **Abidin (2017)** have documented how platform algorithms actively amplify these dynamics, connecting them to broader commercial agendas. But the **Geena Davis Institute** has been documenting identical gender stereotyping in *screen media* and its negative impacts on girls and young women since 2004. The Canadian government has spent years funding media interventions and self-esteem programs to counter these same dynamics, from WAGE’s girls’ body confidence initiatives to the CRTC’s gender parity requirements in Canadian film and television production. A ban ignores decades of scholarship and public investment showing that the amplification of harmful representations is regrettably common across media — and that the solution lies in regulating what platforms are permitted to amplify, not in removing children from the spaces where it happens.

EVIDENCE: Bishop 2018 (doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978); Abidin 2017 (doi.org/10.1177/2056305117707191); Geena Davis Institute (geenadavisinstitute.org/research); WAGE 2024; CRTC 2019

CLAIM 4

“More money for a group of rich tech bros who already have a ton.” – CBC, April 26 2026

The surveillance capitalism critique is legitimate and well-established in the scholarly literature (**Zuboff, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2019**), with a growing body of work documenting how these dynamics specifically target children (**Barassi, 2020; Stoilova, Nandagiri & Livingstone, 2019; Lupton & Williamson, 2017**). It could be the foundation of a regulatory framework that actually holds tech companies accountable. But an age ban is, in many ways, the most industry-friendly possible response. Consider what a ban does *not* require: no changes to algorithmic design, no restrictions on data collection, no transparency in recommendation systems, no liability for harmful content, no removal of manipulative design features. Platforms that “comply” by excluding under-16s face no obligation to become safer for anyone. Meanwhile, the age assurance systems required to enforce any ban will generate entirely new data flows. Verifying users’ ages means collecting identity-adjacent information at scale, creating new commercial opportunities for platforms and a booming age verification industry that profits directly from the legislation. **Premier Kinew’s rhetoric names the right enemy. His policy lets them off the hook.**

EVIDENCE: Barassi 2020 (direct.mit.edu/books/monograph/4996); Stoilova, Nandagiri & Livingstone 2019 (doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1657164); Lupton & Williamson 2017 (doi.org/10.1177/1461444816686328); 5Rights Foundation 2018/2023; McNair & Grimes 2024

The “world-first” ban is not working as promised

Australia’s ban took effect December 10, 2025. A survey of 1,050 Australian youth aged 12–15, conducted by the Molly Rose Foundation with YouthInsight in March 2026, found **61% of teens who had accounts before the ban still had access** to one or more of them. More than half who previously used TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram can still use them, and most had not needed to find workarounds to do so. **70% said it was ‘easy’ to circumvent the ban**, and nearly half (46%) said it was ‘very easy.’

Among teens under 16 still using social media, less than a third (31%) feel safer, half (51%) said there was no change, and 14% felt less safe. Among kids who had fully lost access to their accounts, 42% said they *did* feel safer, while another 42% said there was no change.

While half (50%) said they are now spending less time online, over a third (37%) were simply using other apps and reported no change. **For these kids, the ban has not protected them from problematic industry practices. It handed them to less accountable ones.**

SOURCE: Molly Rose Foundation, March 2026 (mollyrosefoundation.org)

WHAT WE PROPOSE INSTEAD

Protect children through platform accountability, not exclusion

Premier Kinew is right that children need stronger protection online — and right that tech companies are profiting at children’s expense. But an age ban doesn’t threaten those companies. It protects them. Here is what would actually hold them accountable.

- **Age-appropriate design codes** — require platforms to configure defaults for child safety, not extract opt-in compliance from families
- **Algorithmic accountability** — mandate transparency in recommendation systems and prohibit amplification of harmful content to under-18 users
- **Data protection for children** — enforce meaningful consent standards and prohibit commercial profiling of minors
- **Targeted support for at-risk youth** — evidence shows harms are concentrated; policy should be too
- **Include children’s voices** — as one Manitoba teenager told CBC News this week: “Not everything deserves to be banned”

Sara M. Grimes, PhD

Professor & Principal Investigator, Kids Play Tech Lab
McGill University · sara.grimes@mcgill.ca
kidsplaytechlab.ca

POLICY RESPONSE
Manitoba Social Media Ban
May 2026