

SOCIAL

A three-part series that questions the future of Social, Web & Brand

CONTENTS

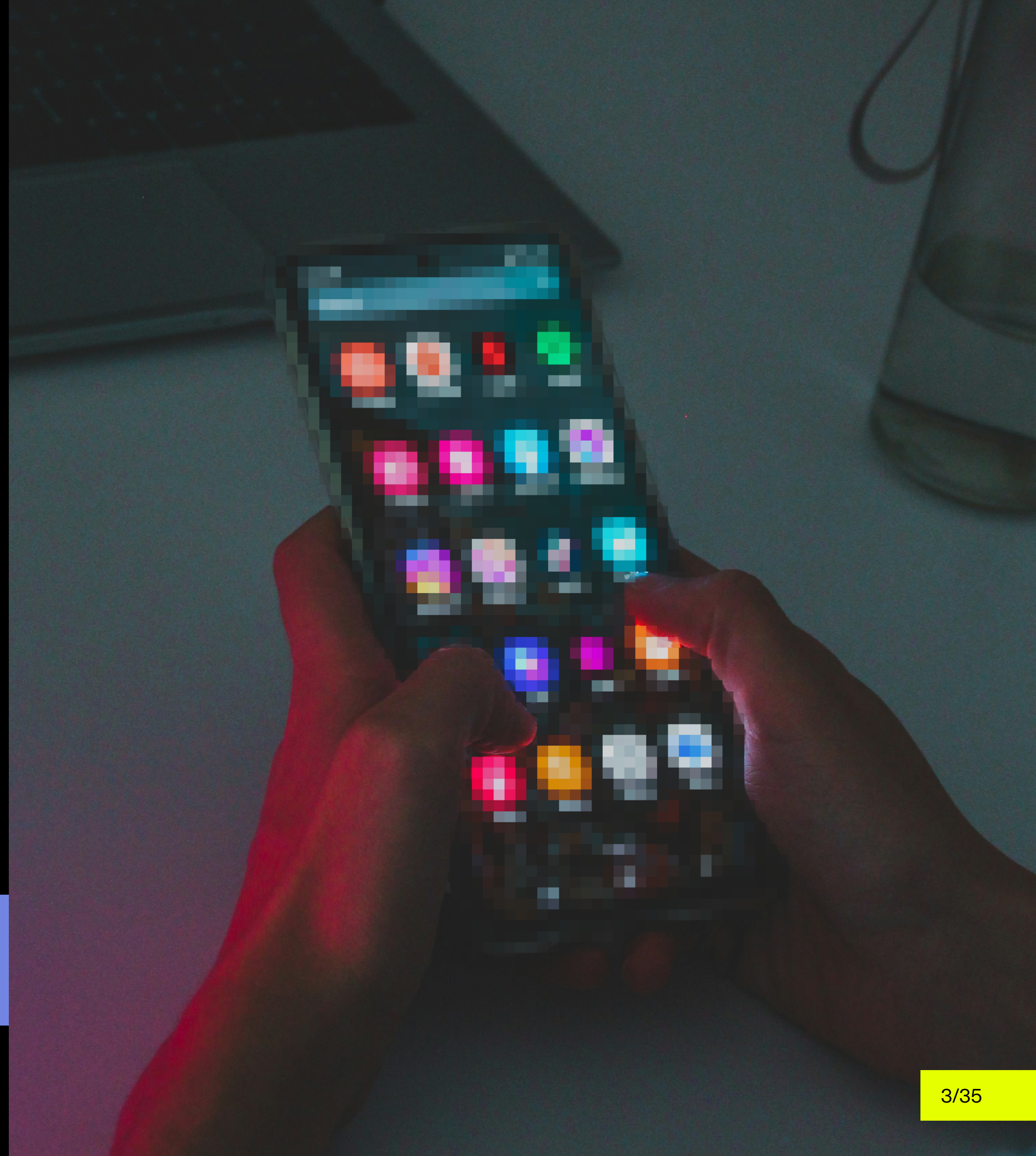


- 03 Introduction
- 05 Background
- 06 User stats: how big are the platforms?
- 08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?
- 15 Marketing context
- 18 Other restrictions and bans: useful comparisons
- 19 Short-term impact
- 20 Long-term impact
- 26 Cultural impact
- 27 Solutions and recommendations
- 33 Conclusion

03 Introduction

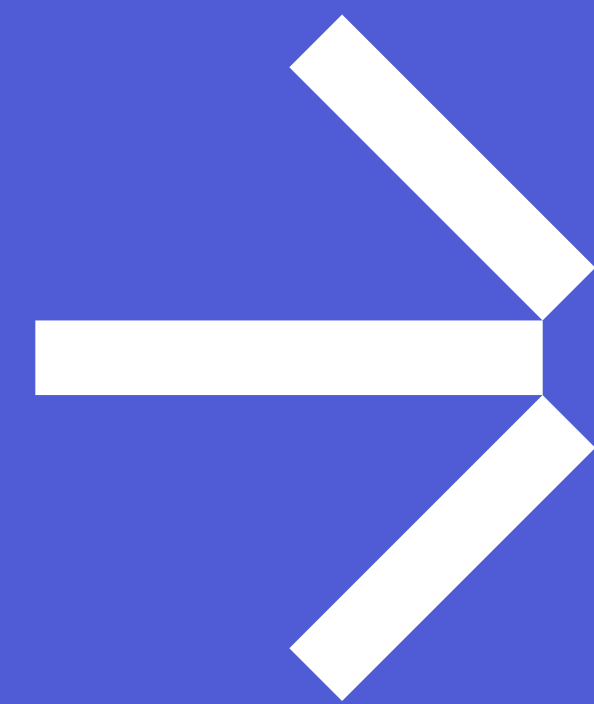
The UK government has announced plans to restrict under-16s' access to social media platforms, with the first regulations expected before the end of 2026 and the main restrictions in spring 2027.

The rules are expected to apply to platforms that allow users to post content, interact socially and receive algorithmically recommended content. The government has named Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and X as likely examples.



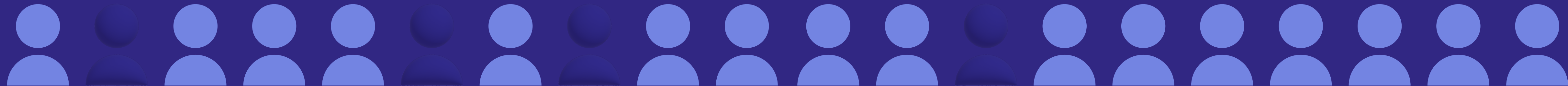
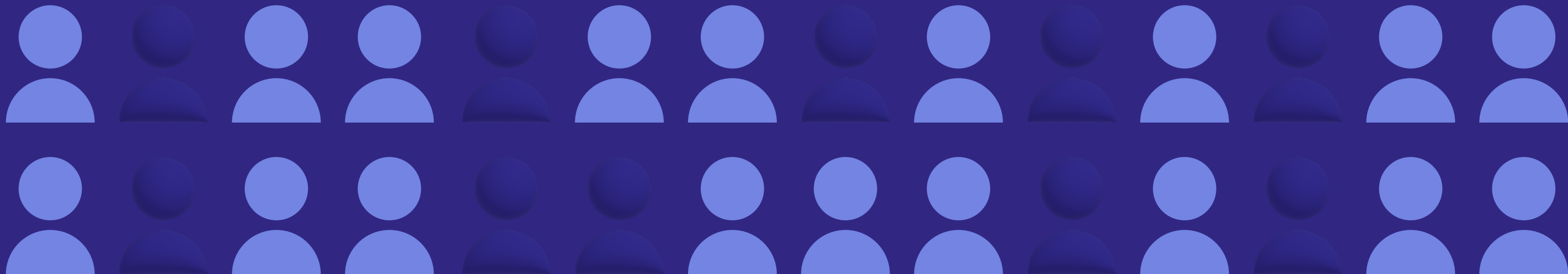
The ban mainly affects under-16s, but older teenagers may notice changes too. For 16 and 17-year-olds, features such as livestreaming and contact from strangers are expected to be switched off by default.

For brands and organisations, the knock-on effect is practical. Younger audiences may become harder to reach directly, so organic content, paid activity, parent and carer messaging, and social-led discovery will all need a rethink.

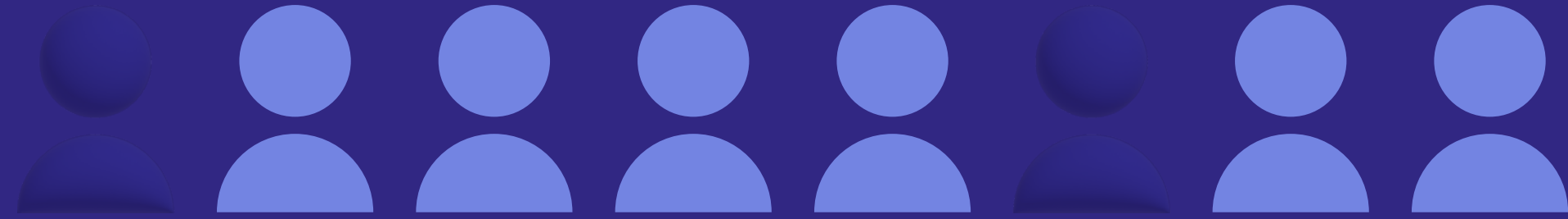
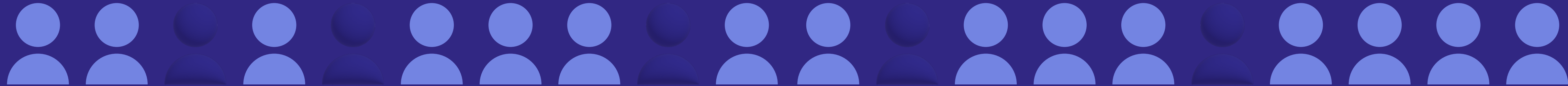


05 Background

The ban follows growing concern about children’s exposure to harmful content, addictive platform design, stranger contact and the failure of existing age gates.

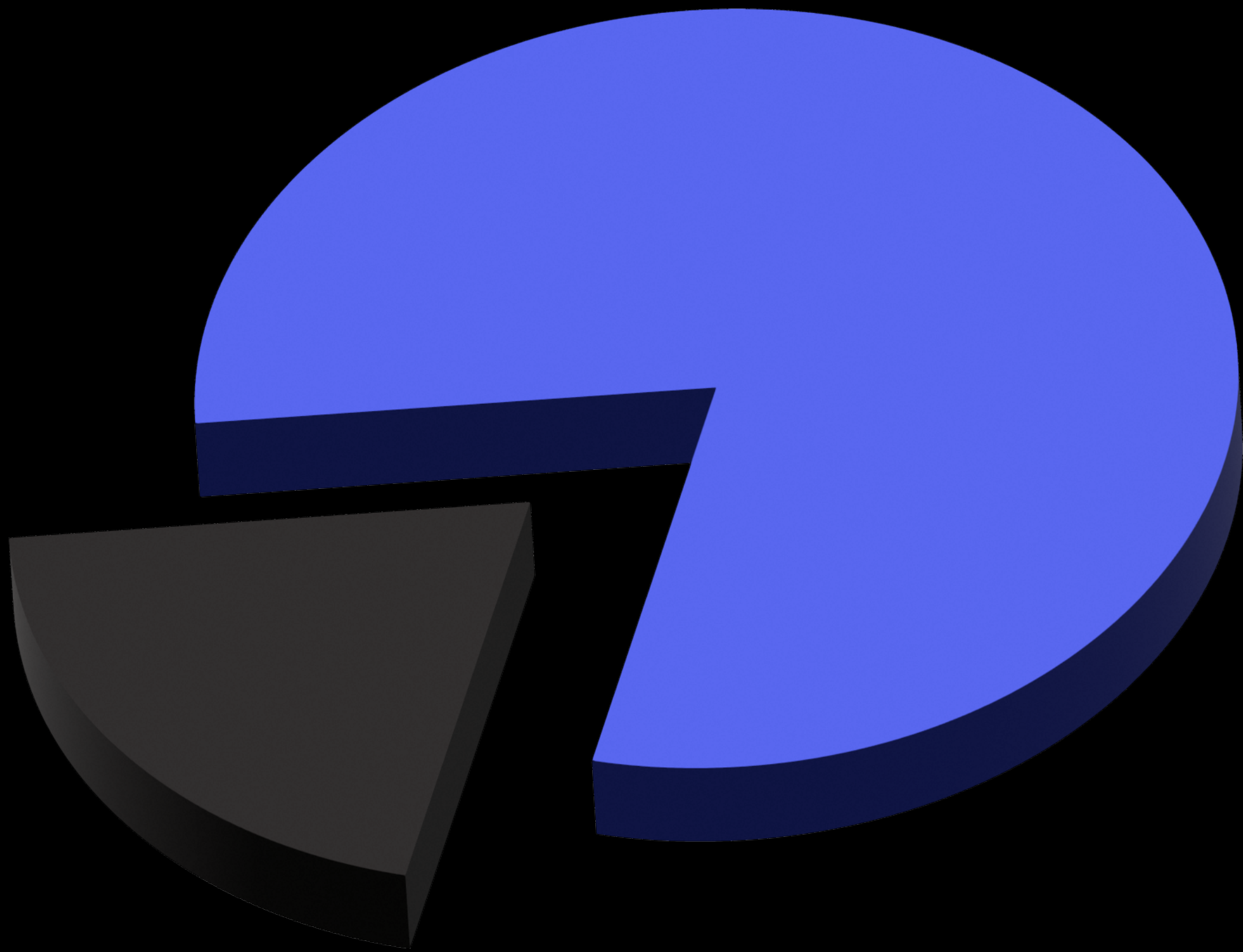


Ofcom has found that 72% of children aged 8 to 12 were accessing major online services despite many platforms setting a minimum age of 13.

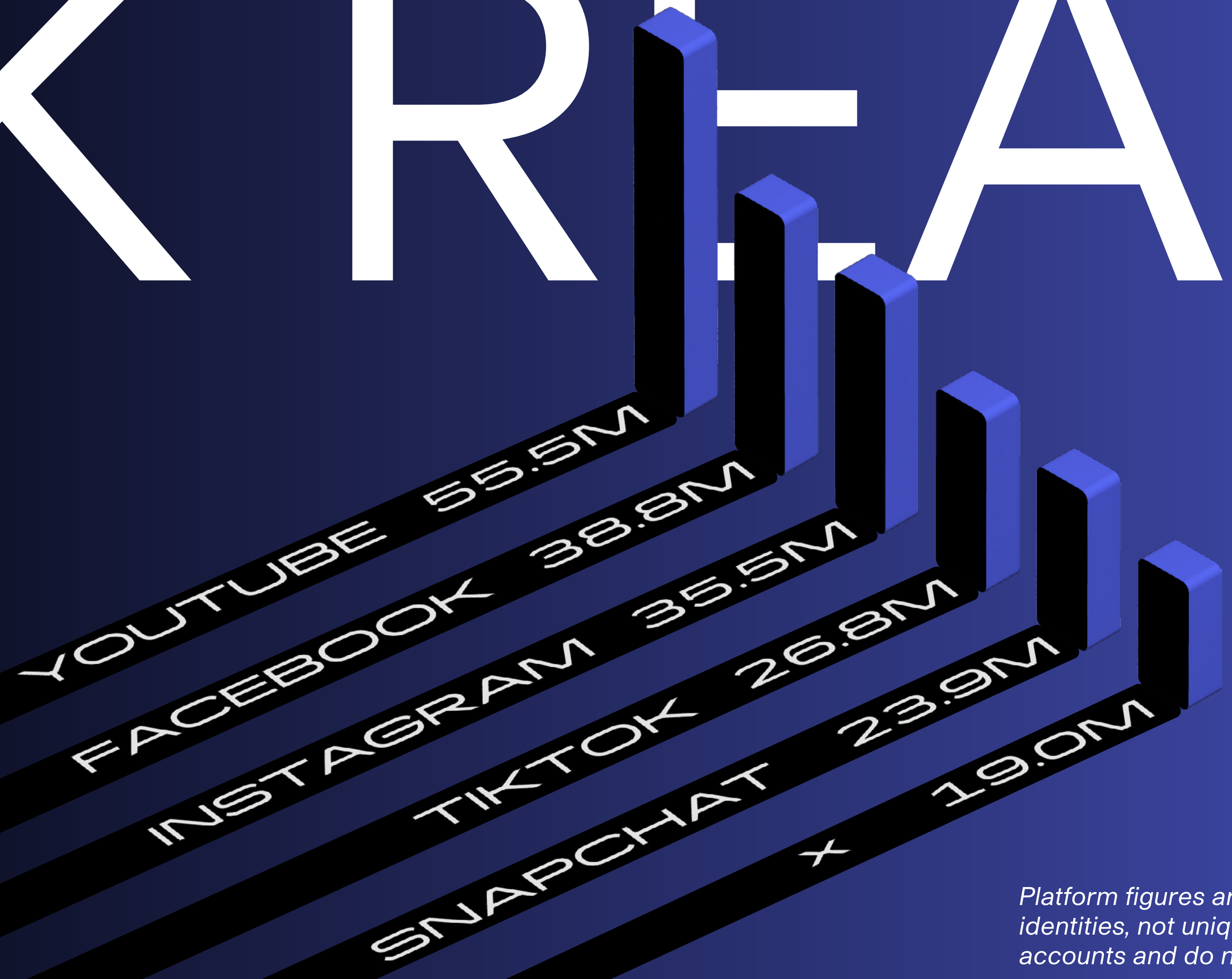


- The policy also sits alongside wider UK online safety regulation.*
- *Since March 2025, platforms have had legal duties to protect users from illegal content.*
 - *Since July 2025, they have had duties to protect children from harmful content.*

The UK has around 55.5m active social media user identities, equivalent to 79.7% of the population. Around 81.5% of internet users are recorded as using at least one social platform.



UK REACH

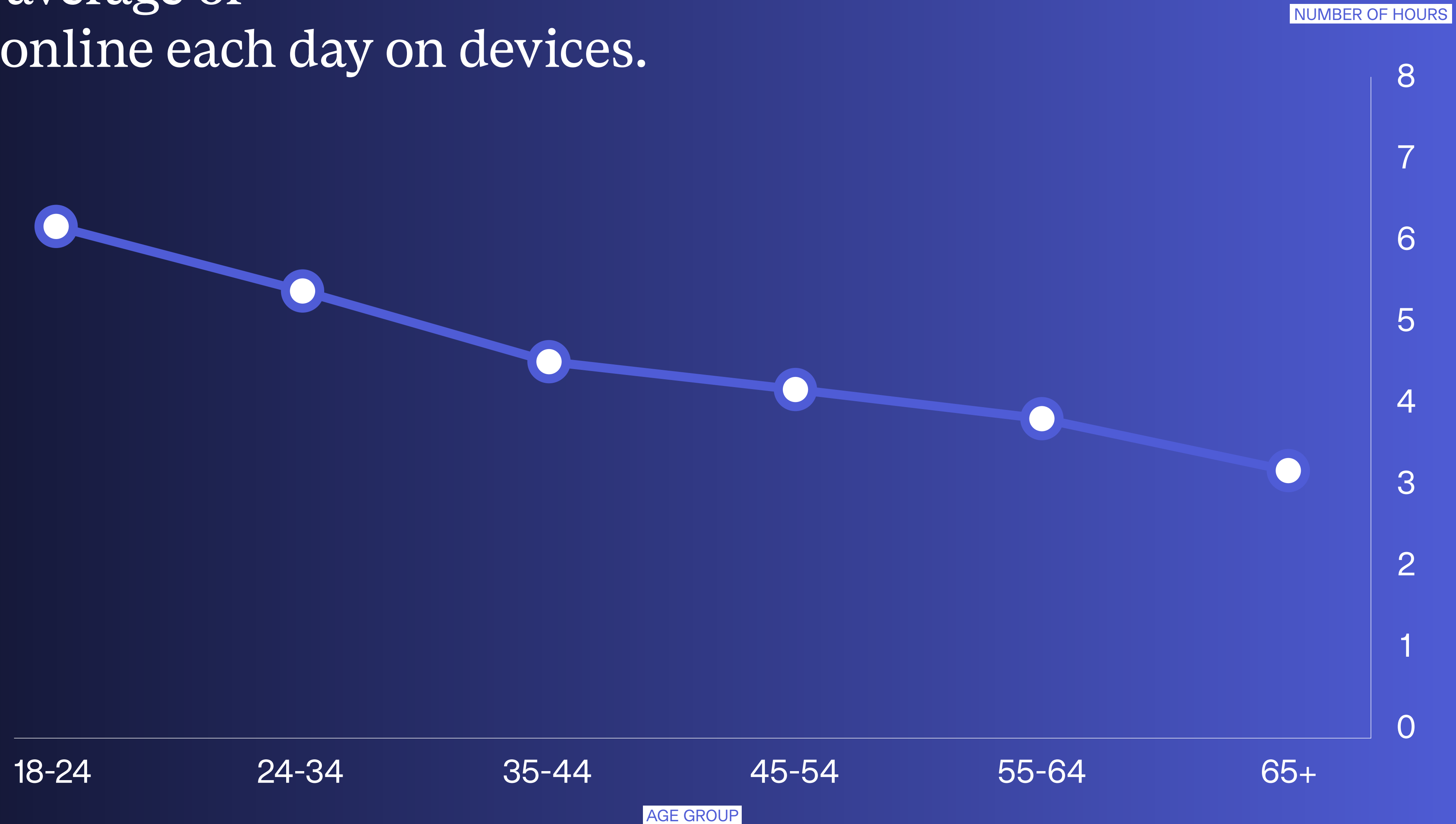


Platform figures are often based on advertising reach or user identities, not unique monthly active users. They can include duplicate accounts and do not always break down under-16 usage clearly.

08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

UK adults spend an average of 4 hours 30 minutes online each day on devices.

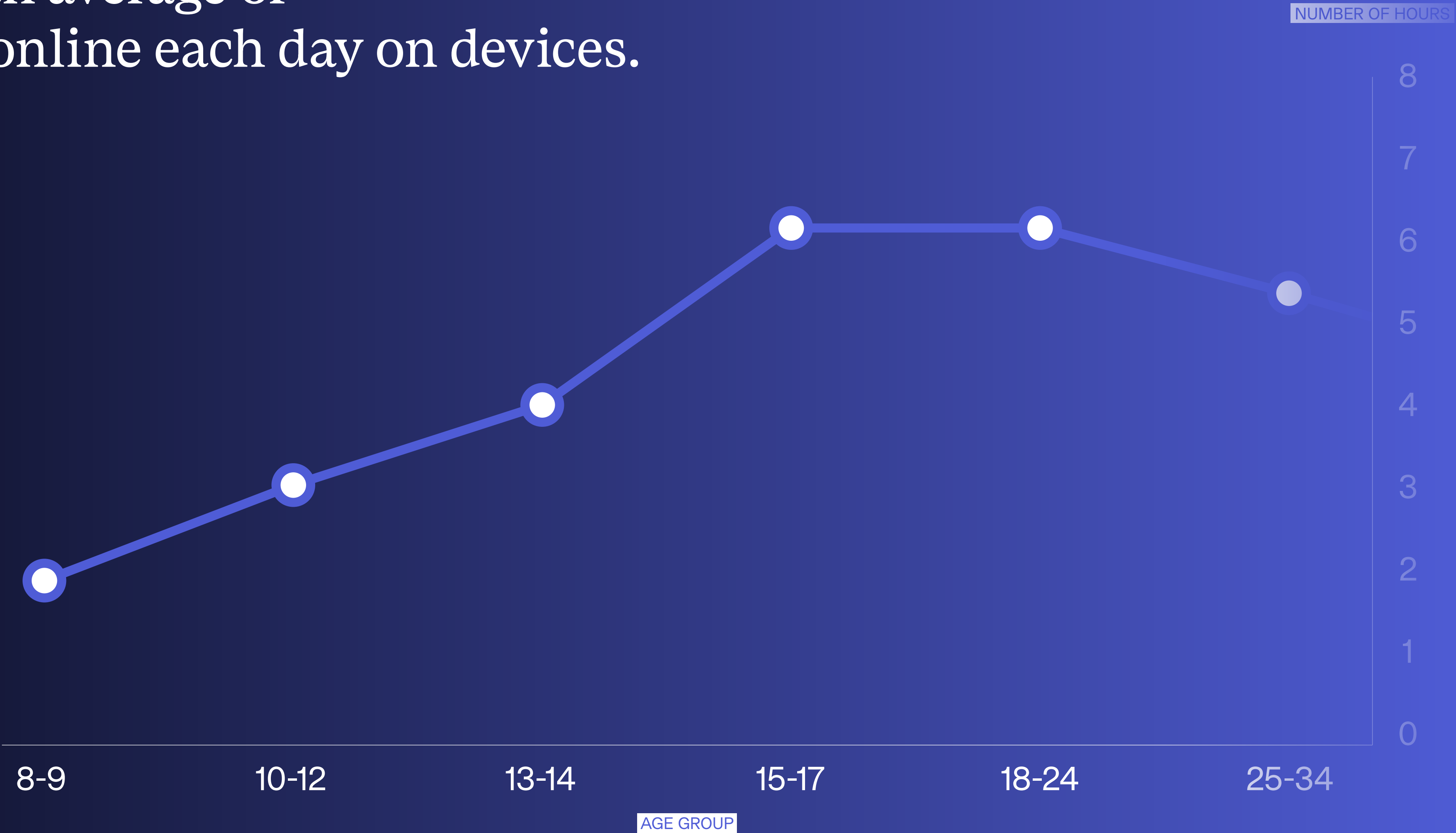
Among 18 to 24-year-olds, that rises to 6 hours 20 minutes. For people aged 65 and over, it falls to 3 hours 20 minutes.



08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

UK children spend an average of 3 hours 49 minutes online each day on devices.

For children, the numbers change quickly with age. Ofcom's passive measurement of 8 to 14-year-olds shows online time rising from just under two hours a day among 8 to 9-year-olds to four hours a day among 13 to 14-year-olds.



08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

8-14: YouTube and Snapchat account for around half of all measured online time

For 8 to 14-year-olds overall, YouTube and Snapchat account for around half of all measured online time. Across this group, average daily online time is 2 hours 59 minutes, with YouTube taking 48 minutes and Snapchat 45 minutes.



8-14 YEAR OLDS

PLATFORM	AVG. DAILY TIME
YouTube	48mins
Snapchat	45mins
TikTok	15mins
Roblox	9mins
WhatsApp	9mins
Instagram	4mins
Facebook & Messenger	3mins

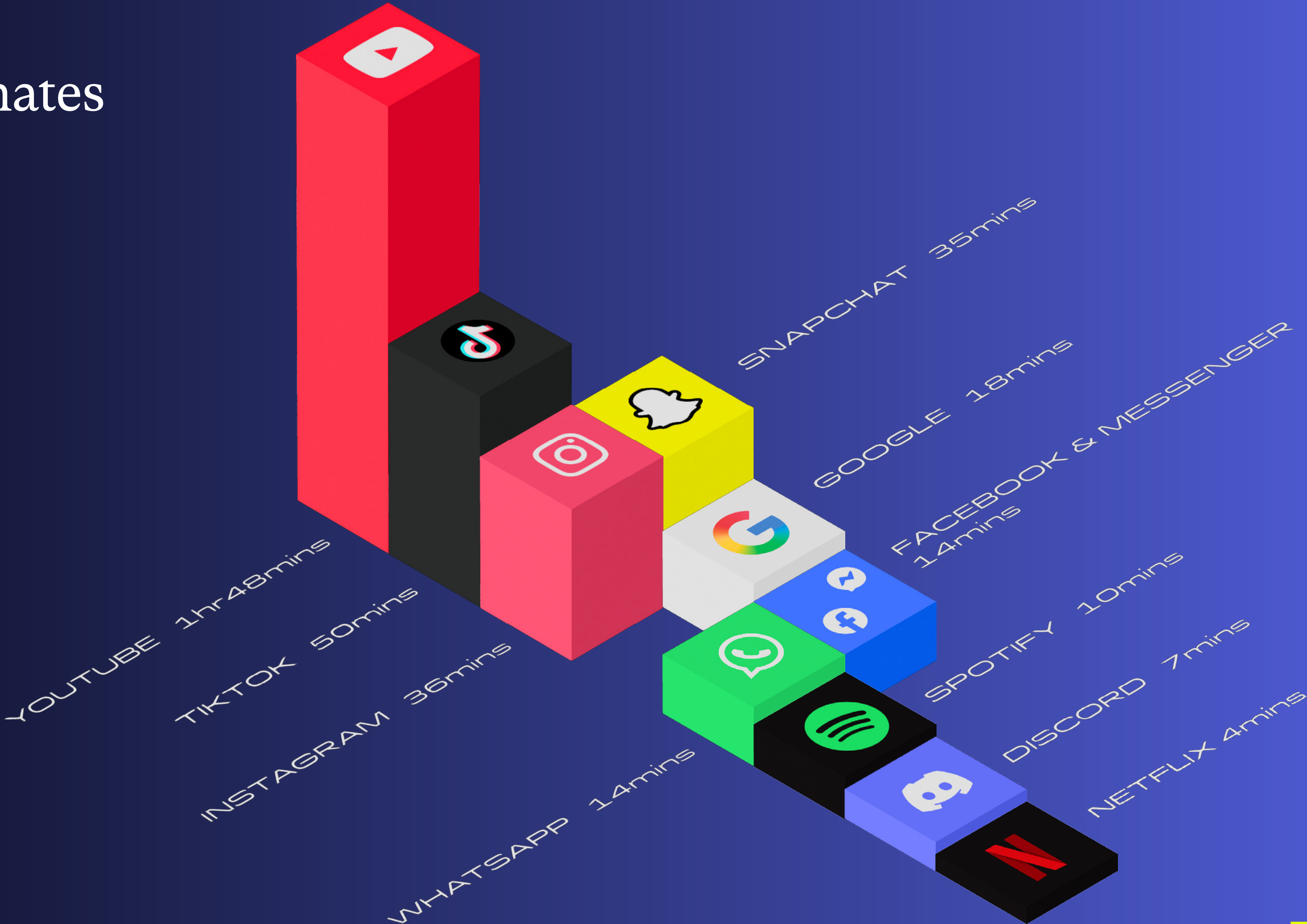
08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

15-17: YouTube dominates

Among 15 to 17-year-olds, the platform mix becomes even more commercially important. YouTube accounts for 1 hour 46 minutes a day, TikTok 50 minutes, Instagram 36 minutes and Snapchat 35 minutes.

15-17 YEAR OLDS

PLATFORM	AVG. DAILY TIME
YouTube	1hr 46mins
TikTok	50mins
Instagram	36mins
Snapchat	35mins
Google	18mins
Facebook & Messenger	14mins
WhatsApp	14mins
Spotify	10mins
Discord	7mins
Netflix	4mins

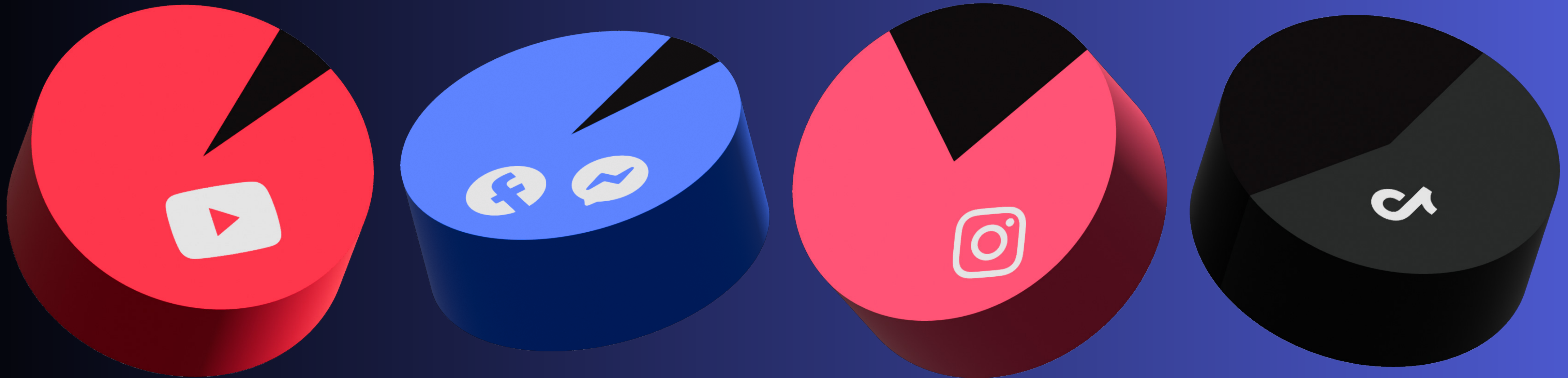


08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

Very young children are also already entering the digital ecosystem. Government evidence states that **85%** of 3 to 5-year-olds go online, **17%** may have their own mobile phone and **37%** use at least one social media app or site.

08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

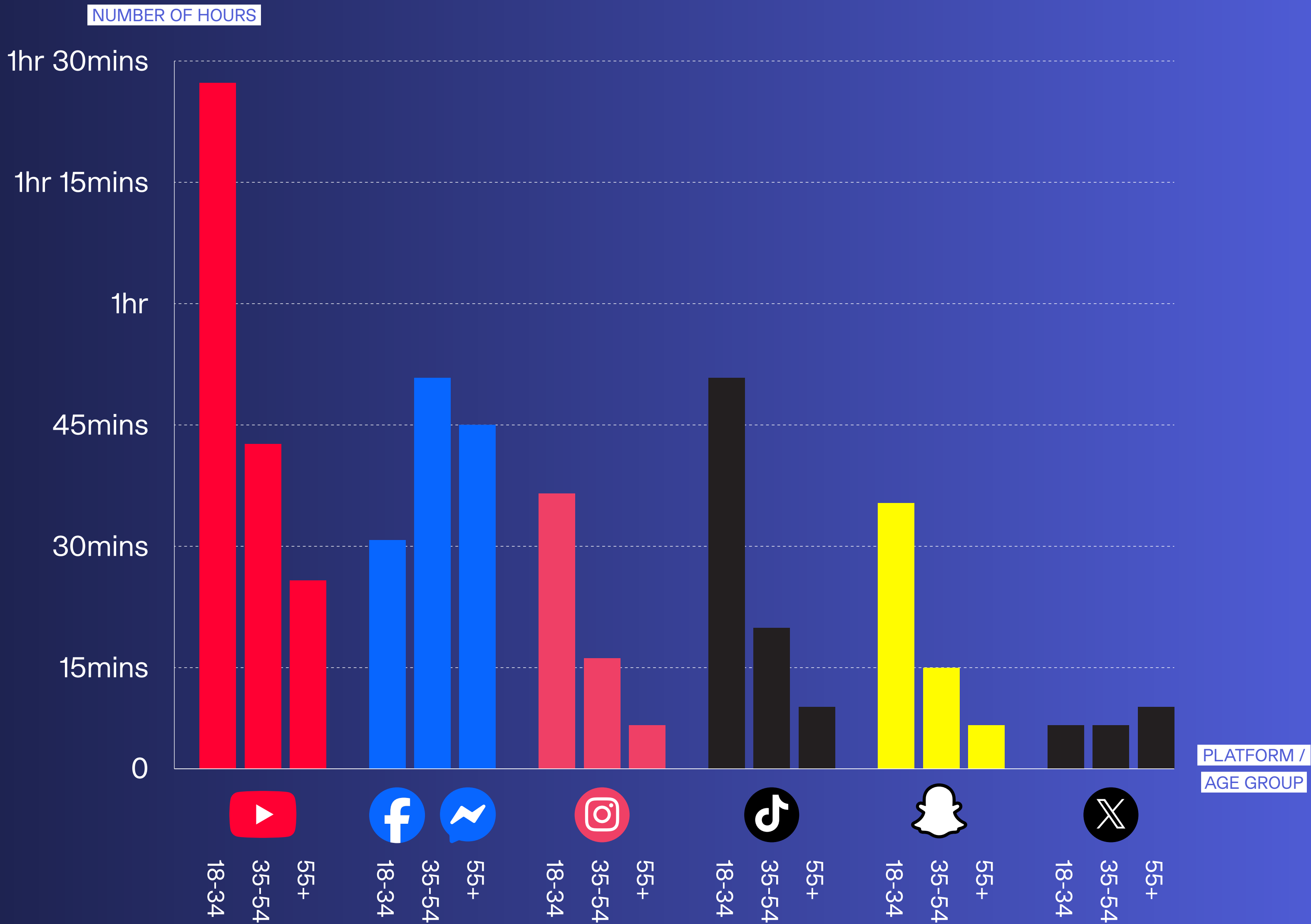
For adults, social media remains strong. YouTube is used by 94% of UK online adults, Facebook and Messenger by 93%, Instagram by 78% and TikTok by 56%.



08 Time spent: how much attention is at risk?

The impact of the ban should not be framed as social media disappearing. Adults, older teens and parents will still be active across social platforms. The likely shift is in how organisations reach younger audiences before the age of 16. Youth attention may become harder to access directly, while parent, carer, community and offline routes become more important.

PLATFORM	AVG. DAILY TIME		
	18-34	35-54	55+
YouTube	1hr 28mins	43mins	28mins
Facebook & Messenger	31mins	50mins	45mins
Instagram	35mins	16mins	8mins
TikTok	49mins	18mins	9mins
Snapchat	34mins	15mins	8mins
X	6mins	6mins	8mins



Social media is important because young audiences often use it passively. Ofcom found that 65% of 8 to 17-year-olds who use social media are passive users, mainly watching, reading, liking or following rather than posting.

A young person does not need to comment, share or post to be influenced by a trend, creator, meme, brand campaign, product or message.



Social media is also a news and culture channel. Among 12 to 15-year-olds who access news, Ofcom found that social media is the most common route, with TikTok used by 42%, YouTube by 38% and Facebook by 29%.

In 2025, the UK digital advertising market reached £40.5bn. Social media advertising accounted for £11.5bn, or 28% of the UK digital ad market. Social video made up 59% of social media investment, showing how heavily the market has moved towards short-form and video-led content.

For youth audiences, the paid advertising picture is more complicated. Brands should be careful with the line “you can’t advertise to under-18s”. The more accurate point is that advertising to children and young people is already heavily restricted in terms of targeting, media placement, and age-sensitive products.

The biggest impact may be the loss of organic discovery, creator influence, meme culture, peer sharing and platform data around younger audiences.

eMarketer has reportedly cut its UK 2027 digital ad spend forecast by £1.3bn, down to £17bn, because millions of under-16s may become harder to reach across platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok.

The same report highlighted Beano Brain research suggesting that, among 7 to 14-year-olds, one-third say YouTube ads or YouTubers are how they find new things they want to buy, compared with 25% for TikTok videos and 22% for TV ads.

18 Other restrictions and bans: useful comparisons



Children: Targeting

The ASA already places limits on how children can be targeted, where ads could cause harm or where products are unsuitable for young audiences. For some categories, marketers must avoid media where more than 25% of the audience is under 18.

Marketing lesson: youth regulation rarely arrives in isolation. It usually changes planning, placement, creative, targeting and measurement.



Transport for London

TfL introduced restrictions on advertising foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Research linked the policy to a reduction of around 1,000 calories per household per week from unhealthy products, with later modelling estimating prevention of 94,867 obesity cases, 2,857 diabetes cases and 1,915 cardiovascular disease cases.

Marketing lesson: restrictions can change both advertising environments and public expectations. They also show that out-of-home media remains powerful enough for regulators to care about.



Tobacco & Vapes Act

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill became law in April 2026. It makes it illegal to sell tobacco to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 and gives the government powers to restrict vape packaging, branding, displays and advertising that appeal to children.

Marketing lesson: youth-facing regulation is increasingly moving beyond direct purchase and into brand visibility, packaging, placement and cultural appeal.

SHORT-TERM

Some under-16s will lose access, some will move to allowed platforms, some will use parents' accounts and some may try workarounds such as VPNs or false age information.

IMPACT

Australia gives the earliest indications of what will happen. The country's under-16 social media restrictions came into effect on 10 December 2025, with platforms required to take reasonable steps to stop under-16s creating or keeping accounts. Platforms can face penalties of up to \$49.5m AUD (approx. £25.84 million GBP).



Australia's eSafety Commissioner said platforms had removed access to 4.7m under-16 accounts by mid-December 2025. However, early research from the Molly Rose Foundation and YouthInsight found that **61% of 12 to 15-year-olds** who had accounts before the ban **still had access** to at least one social media account.

19 Short-term impact

The ban may reduce access, weaken direct reach and make youth audiences harder to measure, but it will not remove young people from online culture overnight.

The short-term marketing challenge will be a lack of reliable youth audience data. Paid targeting is already restricted, and some platform tools already report adult audiences only. For example, TikTok's UK ad reach data in DataReportal is stated for users aged 18+.

Organic content will be more exposed. Brands and youth-facing organisations that rely on TikTok trends, Instagram Reels, Snapchat, YouTube Shorts, ambassadors, creators or meme-led content may find that reach becomes less predictable among under-16s.

The likely impact is not that virality disappears.

It is that youth-led virality becomes more fragmented.

Trends may spread more through older users, private messaging, siblings, creators, gaming communities, events and offline spaces. That could slow some meme cycles and make cultural signals harder for brands to spot early.

Brands with existing intent-led marketing and content will succeed. Making it easier for under 16s to find them. Under 16s still search for products they like, but this will no longer be on social platforms.

LONG-TERM

Long-term, the biggest unknown is whether social media adoption simply shifts to age 16, or whether habits change more permanently.

Two potential outcomes:

IMPACT

Delayed adoption

Young people join platforms at 16 and quickly adopt similar behaviours to previous cohorts.

OR

Changed adoption

Young people form different media habits before 16, making social less central when they become eligible.

“Sometimes, the best political decisions are the unpopular ones. Banning under-16s from social media won’t stop determined teens from connecting online, but it will encourage them to break the rules or find new, riskier spaces.”

Dr Victoria Nash, Associate Professor
& Senior Policy Fellow, Oxford Internet Institute

Oxford researcher Dr Victoria Nash has warned that banning under-16s may not stop determined teenagers from connecting, but could encourage them to break rules or move into riskier spaces.

The ban may reduce some harm, but young people may use workarounds, shared accounts or less visible spaces.

For marketers, the longer-term issue is that social media may no longer be the obvious starting point for building awareness before someone turns 16. Brands that want to be familiar early will need to think harder about where influence happens and who helps shape it.

Boyz n the Hood



Many youth trends now move through TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts and creator networks. Y2K fashion, nostalgic aesthetics, meme formats and niche communities have all been accelerated by social feeds.



The ban could make these trends less visible to brands because under-16 audiences may still influence culture, but in less measurable spaces: group chats, school environments, older siblings, creator spillover, gaming communities and offline events.

If digital access tightens, physical experience becomes more important. This could benefit:

- Sports clubs
- Youth clubs
- Festivals
- Retail experiences
- Live brand activations
- Community partnerships
- Local out-of-home campaigns
- School and university events
- Open days

The government has also announced a £132.5m package for after-school clubs and enrichment activities, which fits the wider policy direction of pushing more childhood activity into offline spaces.

01

BUILD BRAND RECALL EARLIER



If under-16s become harder to reach directly through social media, brand recall becomes more important. Organisations need to be memorable before someone searches, applies, visits, buys or enquires.

That means clearer messaging, consistent creative, distinctive assets and campaigns that work beyond one platform.

02

SHIFT FROM YOUTH-ONLY MESSAGING

Parent and carer communication will become more important, especially where adults influence choices around education, wellbeing, spending, activities and future planning.

The government says the policy is backed by nine in ten parents, which suggests parent-facing safety and trust messages are likely to land well.



03

SOCIAL AS AMPLIFICATION, NOT THE WHOLE STRATEGY

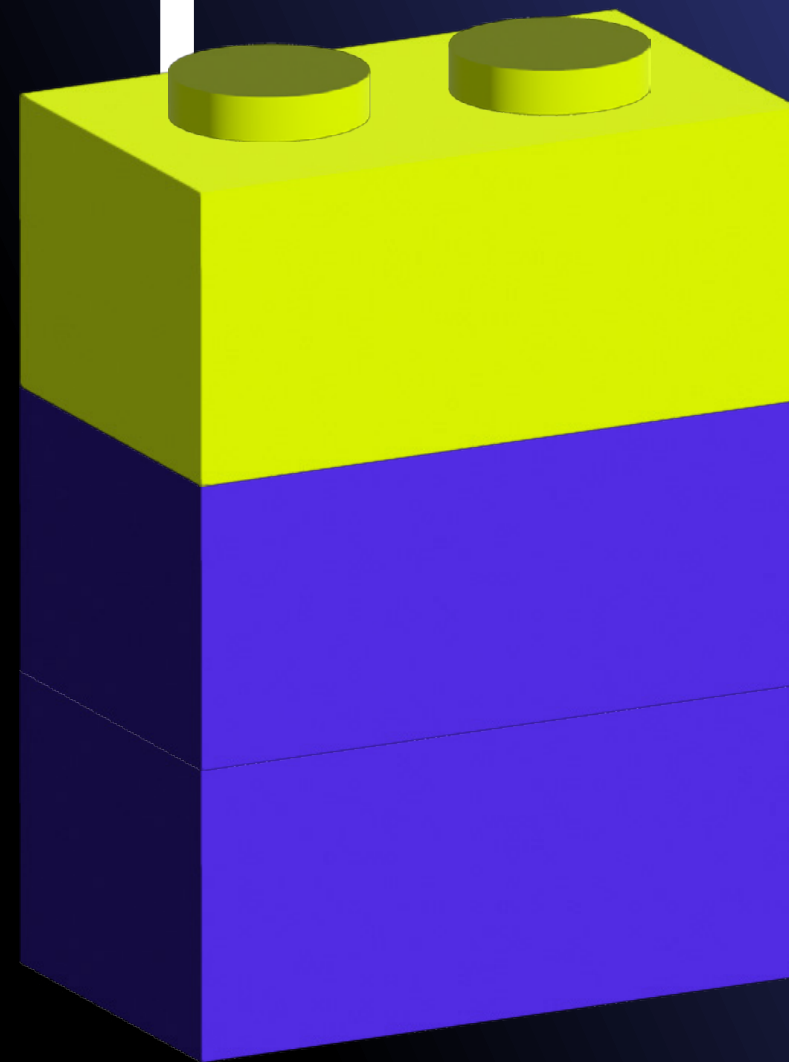


Social should still have a role, especially for 16+ audiences, parents, staff, communities and brand visibility. But it should not be the only route into younger audiences.

CHANNEL	ROLE
Search and SEO	Capture intent when young people or parents actively look for answers
Email marketing	Build owned audiences and reduce dependency on social algorithms
Direct marketing	Reach households, parents and local communities
Out-of-home	Build physical visibility around towns, transport, retail and events
In-person events	Create trust, experience and memory
School/community partnerships	Reach young people through trusted environments
YouTube/search-led video	Support discovery, education and long-form explanation
Streaming/CTV	Reach family audiences in professionally managed environments
PR and local media	Build credibility and awareness outside platform feeds
Owned content hubs	Give audiences somewhere useful to land after discovery

04

BUILD FIRST-PARTY DATA NOW



The most important practical recommendation is to start building owned audience routes before 2027.

That means:

- ☐ NEWSLETTER SIGN-UPS
- ☐ DOWNLOADABLE GUIDES
- ☐ EVENT REGISTRATIONS
- ☐ OPEN DAY BOOKINGS
- ☐ BROCHURE REQUESTS
- ☐ ENQUIRY FORMS
- ☐ CRM SEGMENTATION
- ☐ PARENT-SPECIFIC JOURNEYS
- ☐ CUSTOMER/PROSPECT JOURNEYS
- ☐ POST-EVENT FOLLOW-UPS

The future marketing risk is not just lower reach. It is relying on platforms that may no longer show who is seeing, engaging or being influenced.

05

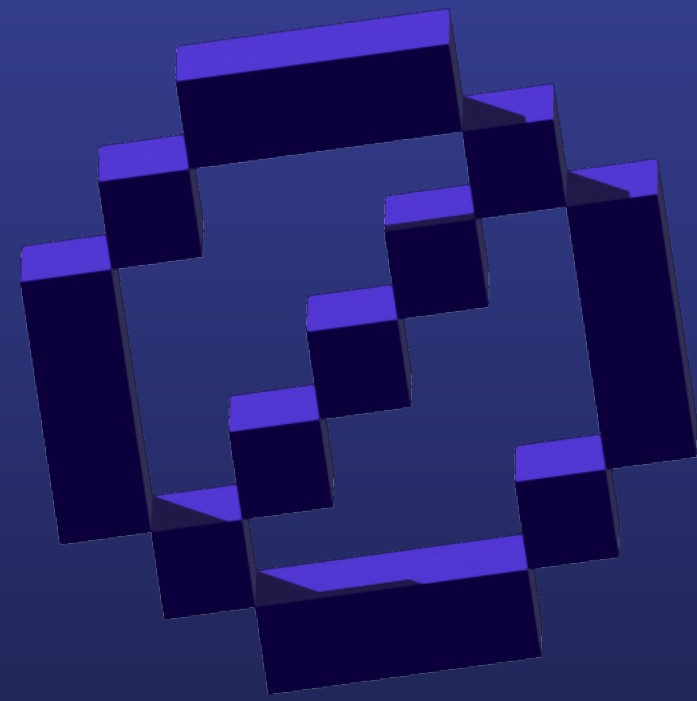
PLAN FOR COMPLIANCE AND CREATIVE CHANGE

Organisations should review content that currently relies on under-16 appeal, especially if it uses humour, memes, creators, school-age references, trends or direct youth messaging.

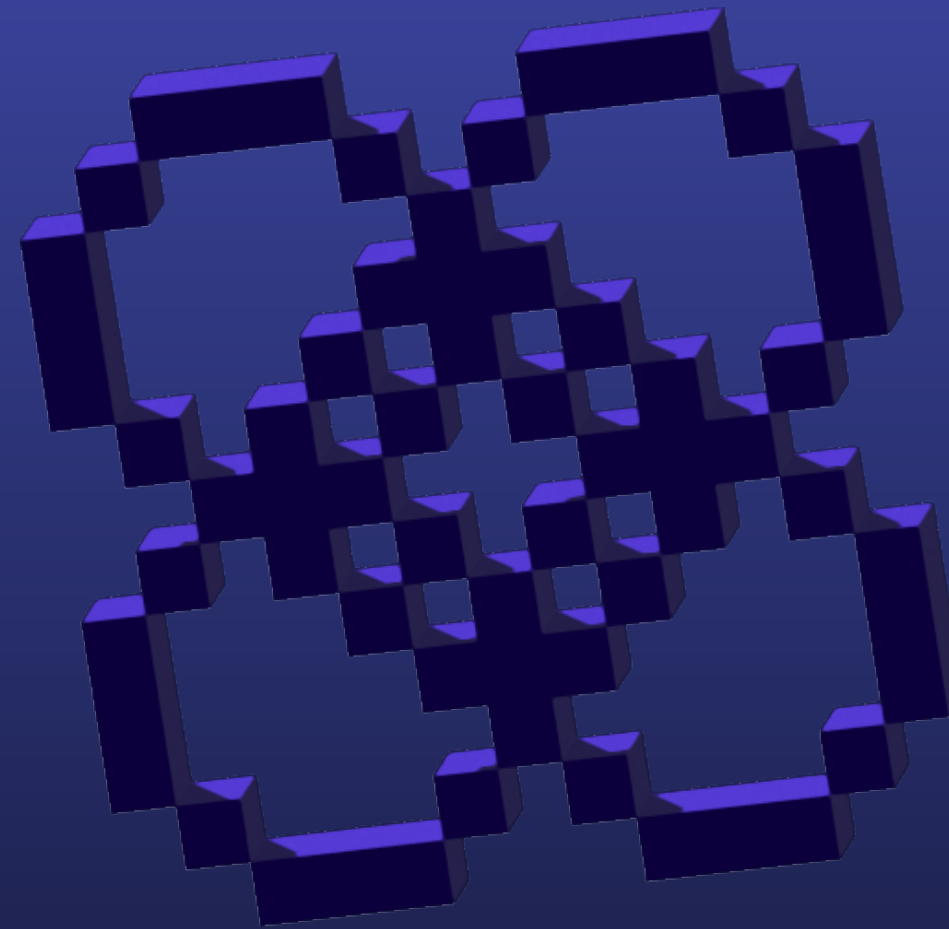
The aim is not to become boring. It is to make sure content can still work with:

- ☐ PARENTS AND CARERS
- ☐ 16+ AUDIENCES
- ☐ YOUTH ORGANISATIONS
- ☐ LOCAL COMMUNITIES
- ☐ FUTURE CUSTOMERS
- ☐ EXISTING CUSTOMERS AND ADVOCATES
- ☐ SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
where relevant

CONCLUSION



The under-16 social media ban will not end social media. But it could end the assumption that every audience is reachable through social platforms from an early age.



The organisations that adapt best will be those that stop treating social as the full strategy and start treating it as one part of a broader communications system.



The next era of youth-facing marketing will be built around trust, brand memory, parent influence, owned audiences, offline visibility and content that works beyond algorithmic feeds.

WANT MORE?



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