# The troubling impact of social media on teenagers and the push for stricter smartphone regulations



The influence of social media on teenagers has come under intense scrutiny, particularly in relation to the insidious effects of misogynistic content propagated through online channels. This issue has been brought to the forefront by Jack Thorne, the writer of the recently acclaimed Netflix drama "Adolescence". The series, which follows a 13-year-old character, Jamie Miller, portrayed by Owen Cooper, who is arrested for the murder of a female classmate after being exposed to radical online ideologies, has ignited discussions about the need for stricter regulations on smartphone usage among minors.

In an interview with The Guardian, Thorne advocated for a comprehensive ban on smartphone access for individuals under the age of 16, equivalent to the restrictions placed on smoking. He stated, “If it was my decision, I would be talking of smartphones like cigarettes and issuing an outright ban on all use by under-16s, but if that isn’t possible the digital age of consent is a fine alternative.” Thorne urged the UK government to take “radical” measures against technology companies and highlighted the necessity of following the lead of countries like France, Norway, and Australia in restricting adolescents' access to social media platforms.

The show "Adolescence" has been praised by academics and activists for its portrayal of the "manosphere", a term used to describe a complex web of online spaces that demean feminism and promote anti-feminist sentiments. Within its narrative, the series illustrates how specific emojis can signify belonging to this community, with teenage characters explaining their meanings. For instance, the red pill emoji is portrayed as a symbol for awakening to a misogynistic worldview, while the 100 emoji is linked to the “80/20 rule” – a belief that a minority of men attract the majority of women.

Concerns regarding the interpretation of emojis have also been endorsed by experts in the field. Dr Robert Lawson, a sociolinguistics expert from Birmingham City University, noted that while fringe elements should not incite “moral panic,” there exists a need to be aware of the language utilised within such communities. He explained, “There’s an element of, if you want to be a part of this community, you need to learn the lingo,” emphasising the systemic structures embedded within incel culture.

The rising influence of such ideologies among young people has been corroborated by a study from Dublin City University's anti-bullying centre, revealing that social media apps like TikTok and YouTube Shorts can rapidly feed anti-feminist content to devices registered to users aged 16 to 18. Additionally, research conducted in February documented that young men from Generation Z demonstrated a tendency to view feminism as more harmful than beneficial, a stark contrast to the perspectives of baby boomers.

In response to the evolving digital landscape, the UK recently enacted the Online Safety Act, which mandates that social media companies will face fines if they fail to adequately protect children from harmful content, including those that propagate misogyny. However, a representative from Ofcom clarified that emojis will only be classified as harmful if they incite hatred, thus complicating the enforcement of regulations around coded language.

Daisy Greenwell, co-founder of the campaign group Smartphone Free Childhood, highlighted the importance of the dialogue initiated by "Adolescence", asserting that there needs to be legislative action to curtail harmful smartphone algorithms aimed at teenagers. She remarked, “It’s not fair to suggest that this is something that parents can solve. We need better legislation so that all kids are safe, not just those whose parents have got the time to make sure they’re not looking at incel content.”

Police forces have also warned about the significance of emoji interpretation among youths, as depicted in the series. A pivotal scene in "Adolescence" illustrates a detective, DI Luke Bascombe, discussing the hidden meanings of emojis with his son. This dialogue underscores the concerns about the online interactions of teenagers, which can sometimes express harmful ideologies.

The discourse surrounding the values and meanings ascribed to emojis, alongside the potential risks associated with smartphone use among minors, signifies an ongoing challenge as society navigates the complex landscape of technology and youth culture.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ladbible.com/entertainment/tv/netflix-adolescence-jamie-ending-writer-jack-thorne-339906-20250318> - This article discusses Jack Thorne's Netflix series 'Adolescence' and its impact on discussions about social media and youth, highlighting Thorne's advocacy for stricter smartphone regulations.
* <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv/2025/03/jack-thornes-adolescence-is-how-crime-drama-should-be-done> - This review of 'Adolescence' emphasizes the series' portrayal of complex social issues, including the influence of online ideologies on teenagers.
* <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/sociology/lawson-robert.aspx> - This link provides information about Dr. Robert Lawson, a sociolinguistics expert, whose insights on language within online communities are relevant to discussions about emoji meanings and their implications.
* <https://www.dcu.ie/anti-bullyingcentre/index.shtml> - Dublin City University's anti-bullying centre conducts research on social media's impact on youth, including the spread of anti-feminist content, which aligns with the themes explored in 'Adolescence'.
* <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/> - Ofcom is involved in regulating online content in the UK, including the enforcement of the Online Safety Act, which aims to protect children from harmful material.
* <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/hansard/commons/todays-hansard/> - This link provides access to UK parliamentary discussions, including those related to the Online Safety Act and its implications for social media regulation.