



Insights

Beyond the Feed: Media planning after the UK under-16 social media ban



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Executive Summary

The UK government plans to ban under-16s from using certain social media services from Spring 2027. It has also said that high-risk features such as livestreaming and stranger communication will be restricted for under-18s, with 16- and 17-year-olds still able to access social media but with some features switched off by default. Stronger age checks are expected to support enforcement.

For brands, this is not just a youth-safety story. It is a paid-media and brand-reach story. The channels that have often been used for fast, low-cost youth awareness - particularly paid social, short-form video and influencer-led feed activity - will become less reliable for under-16 reach. This will affect any brand that needs to build familiarity before young people, parents or carers enter a decision window. That includes further and higher education, recruitment, skills and training, but also leisure, retail, financial services, public information, sport, entertainment, health, charity and community brands.

The right response is not to look for loopholes. It is to redesign the media system around broader, more visible and more trusted environments: out-of-home, cinema, linear TV, BVOD, SVOD/AVOD, digital audio, radio, search, contextual digital, community partnerships and creator content used in a compliant way.

The biggest strategic shift is from targeting young people in feeds to becoming visible in their world - and in the worlds of the adults and households that influence them.



*The strategic shift is clear:
from targeting young people
in feeds to becoming visible
in their world.*

What is changing

The government has said it will use a model similar to Australia, with social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook and X identified as examples of the type of platform included in that model. Messaging services such as WhatsApp and Signal are not intended to be included. The first set of Regulations is expected before the end of 2026, with implementation planned for Spring 2027.

The change matters for advertising because the under-16 audience has historically been reachable in large numbers through logged-in social platforms, creator feeds, video platforms and algorithmic recommendation environments. Once access is restricted, under-16 paid social reach, platform retargeting pools, social engagement signals and creator-led distribution will all become less dependable.

The implication is simple: brands that wait until 2027 to rebuild their youth and family media plans will be late. Testing new reach models should start now.

The HFSS parallel

The closest planning parallel is the HFSS advertising restriction. From 5 January 2026, UK rules introduced a 9pm watershed for advertising identifiable less healthy food or drink products on broadcast TV and a 24-hour restriction on paid-for advertising of these products online.

The under-16 social media ban is different because it restricts audience access rather than product advertising. But the planning lesson is similar: regulation does not remove the need to build brands. It changes the route to attention.

HFSS showed that brands need to separate brand-building, product or offer messaging and conversion activity more carefully. The same principle applies here. Brands should build salience through broad, compliant, culturally visible media, then use age-appropriate digital and direct response channels when the audience enters a permissible decision stage.

What changes for paid media

The likely paid-media impact is a rebalancing away from youth social as the default awareness channel and towards a broader media architecture.

- Paid social becomes less useful for under-16 awareness. Campaigns that need to influence 13-15s should not be built around restricted social environments.
- Paid social becomes more concentrated around 16+ and adult audiences. It can still play a role for consideration and conversion, but it should not be the only reach layer.
- Retargeting pools shrink. If young people cannot enter logged-in social platforms, early funnel engagement and video-view retargeting signals will be weaker.
- Family and adult influence becomes more important. Parents, carers, teachers, advisers, coaches and peers become more valuable media audiences.
- Creative needs to work harder in public and shared environments. OOH, cinema, BVOD and SVOD do not offer the same individualised sequencing as paid social, so distinctive assets, simple messaging and clear next steps matter more.



The new planning principle: public, household and culturally relevant reach

The new channel strategy should be built around five planning principles:

1. Public visibility: be seen in real places - streets, transport, town centres, campuses, cinemas, leisure spaces, retail environments and community venues.
2. Household reach: use large-screen channels such as linear TV, BVOD and SVOD/AVOD to reach families and decision influencers together.
3. Contextual relevance: plan by place, moment, programme, genre, mindset and community rather than relying only on individual platform targeting.
4. Trusted voices: use creators, ambassadors, learners, employees and community advocates as proof, not as a workaround to reach restricted audiences.
5. Simple conversion journeys: make offline and large-screen attention easy to act on through search, QR codes, short URLs, open events, call-backs, landing pages and CRM.

Planning for family audiences

The ban increases the importance of family audiences. Under-16s may be less reachable through social feeds, but they will still be influenced by parents, carers, siblings, peers, teachers, advisers and household conversations.

For brands, this means the family is not just a secondary audience. It is often a media audience, a reassurance audience and a conversion audience.

BVOD, SVOD/AVOD, cinema and OOH are especially useful because they create shared visibility. A parent might see the same message as the young person. A sibling might recognise the campaign. A carer might search the brand afterwards. A teacher or adviser might see the OOH creative on the route to work.

Family-audience planning should use three creative layers:

1. Youth-facing message: make the opportunity feel relevant, optimistic and socially real.
2. Parent/carer reassurance: explain safety, value, support, outcomes, practicalities and next steps.
3. Shared campaign idea: use one distinctive line, visual asset or story that can work across OOH, cinema, TV, BVOD, SVOD, audio and search.

For further and higher education, recruitment, skills and training brands, this could mean balancing aspiration with practical reassurance: what the route leads to, what support is available, what it costs, how to travel there, what happens next, and why the choice is credible. For broader brands, it means building campaigns that can be accepted by parents and still feel culturally relevant to young people.

Out-of-home: the public reach layer

OOH should move from a supporting channel to a core youth and family reach layer. It is visible in the places where young people and families move through the day: school routes, bus corridors, rail stations, high streets, shopping centres, leisure centres, cinemas, libraries, retail parks and local community spaces.

Route is the Joint Industry Currency for OOH audience measurement in Great Britain. It provides audience data for adults aged 15+ and reports on who sees advertising on posters and digital screens, with a methodology that incorporates attention and likely-to-see measures.

For under-15 audiences, advertisers should be cautious about precision claims. The right approach is to plan by environment, route, catchment and moment rather than pretending OOH can deliver individual-level child targeting.

OOH also connects well to digital action. Outsmart reports that people exposed to an OOH campaign were 17% more likely to engage with the brand on mobile, rising to 38% among the top 20 performing campaigns in the study.

OOH is also a growing and resilient market. Outsmart reported that UK OOH revenue reached GBP 1.44bn in 2025, the highest-ever annual level, with DOOH accounting for 67% of annual revenue.

Use OOH to build fame, normalise routes and choices, create local familiarity, drive branded search and make a brand feel present in the real world.

Linear TV, BVOD and SVOD/AVOD: the household reach layer

Large-screen video should be treated as one of the most important alternatives to under-16 social reach, particularly for family audiences.

Ofcom reports that people aged 4+ spent an average of 4 hours 30 minutes per day watching video content at home in 2024, with 84% of in-home video viewing through the TV set. Ofcom also reports that broadcaster content still accounted for the majority of Barb-measured in-home video viewing in 2024, and that BVOD viewing reached 25 minutes per person per day.

Thinkbox reports that in 2025 people watched 3 hours 26 minutes of Total TV each day, that VOD represented 69% of Total TV viewing for 16-34s, and that Total TV advertising accounted for 85% of the video advertising seen each day.

BVOD is especially important because it combines TV-like quality and targeting with broadcaster environments. Thinkbox's BVOD research says that broadcaster VOD delivers advertising engagement through screen size, shared viewing and a clear value exchange. It also reports that BVOD adds incremental reach to linear TV campaigns, including an average 4% increase in adult reach and 8% increase in 16-34 reach.

SVOD/AVOD is becoming more important because ad tiers create a larger addressable household video layer. Barb reported that 20.6m UK homes, or 69.7%, had access to an SVOD service in Q4 2025. The same Barb release reported that 6.9m UK homes were on Netflix's ad tier, 11.9m UK homes were on Amazon Prime Video's ad tier and 2.6m UK homes were on Disney+'s ad tier.

For family audiences, BVOD and SVOD/AVOD matter because they are household environments. They can reach parents, carers, siblings and young people in the same viewing ecosystem, especially when planned around family programming, entertainment, sport, event television, drama, reality, comedy, documentaries and age-appropriate youth or family content.

Use linear TV, BVOD and SVOD/AVOD for national or regional brand fame, family reassurance, broad reach, premium video storytelling and response uplift. Use them alongside search, OOH and cinema so a family who sees the campaign can easily find the brand later.

Practical planning guidance:

- Use BVOD to extend linear reach, especially among lighter linear viewers and younger adults.
- Use SVOD/AVOD ad tiers for household-scale reach, particularly where family, parent or carer audiences are important.
- Plan by programme context and genre, not just demographic proxies.
- Create 30-second and 15-second versions, with shorter cutdowns for BVOD/SVOD frequency management.
- Use clear search prompts, short URLs or memorable campaign lines rather than relying on click-through behaviour.

Digital audio, radio and podcasts: the routine and commute layer

Audio is useful because it reaches families and young people around routines: school runs, commuting, working, studying, exercise, weekend travel and household time. Ofcom's Media Nations report notes that live radio listening remains resilient despite the range of other audio content available, and that smart speaker listening continues to grow.

Use radio and digital audio for frequency, local presence, parent/carer reach, event reminders, open-day prompts, search-driving messages and regional reinforcement alongside OOH and video.

Search, SEO and owned journeys: the demand capture layer

As social reach becomes less dependable for under-16s, brands need to make sure offline and large-screen attention can convert. Search, SEO, maps, landing pages, comparison content, FAQs, open-event registration, adviser call-backs and CRM become more important.

Assume that a young person, parent or carer may first see the campaign on OOH, cinema, BVOD or SVOD, then search later. Campaign naming, page titles, meta descriptions and landing-page language should match the public creative.

Creators, influencers and ambassadors: the credibility layer

Influencers still matter, but their role changes. They should not be used as a workaround to reach under-16s on restricted platforms. They should be used as a proof and credibility layer across compliant environments.

For under-16 audiences, creator and ambassador content can be repurposed into owned channels, landing pages, cinema edits, OOH portrait creative, school-safe resources, event content, parent-facing social and contextual video. For 16+ audiences, creators can still support consideration and conversion, provided the campaign is transparent, responsible and age-appropriate.

ASA/CAP guidance is clear that influencer advertising should be obviously identifiable as advertising. CAP also states that marketing communications addressed to, targeted directly at or featuring children must not exploit their credulity, loyalty, vulnerability or lack of experience.

This matters because Ofcom's 2025-6 children and parents research found that, when children aged 8-17 were shown influencer social posts, six in ten correctly identified the posts as paid endorsements, but significant minorities believed the celebrities had shared them because they wanted to share information or thought the product was cool or good to use.

You can use real learners, employees, graduates, apprentices, ambassadors, families, tutors, community figures and credible creators to show believable proof. Prioritise "what it is really like" over polished lifestyle content.

Community, partnerships and experiential: the trust layer

As social media access changes, offline spaces become more valuable. Brands should treat schools, colleges, campuses, careers fairs, community venues, sports clubs, arts spaces, youth services, local employers, libraries and cultural partners as part of the media system, not just PR or outreach.

You should consider and use events and partnerships to turn broad awareness into lived experience. For brands in further and higher education, recruitment, skills or training, this might mean taster sessions, open events, parent evenings, employer showcases, mentor content or local community activations. For broader youth and family brands, it might mean retail, leisure, sport, entertainment or public-service experiences that give the campaign real-world credibility.



A teen or parent might not act immediately, but the campaign can shape what feels familiar, trusted and possible later.

Our recommended media architecture

Under 16: build memory, confidence and permission

The objective for under-16s should be brand familiarity, route normalisation and confidence, not aggressive lead generation.

- Use OOH for local visibility, physical routes and community salience.
- Use cinema for family moments, school-holiday bursts and high-attention storytelling.
- Use linear TV, BVOD and SVOD/AVOD for household reach and family awareness.
- Use audio for routine-based reminders and parent/carer frequency.
- Use contextual digital and safe educational environments where appropriate.
- Use community partnerships and events to create real-world experience.
- Use parent, carer, teacher and adviser targeting to influence the conversation around the young person.

Ages 16-17: convert interest into action

For 16- and 17-year-olds, social media can still play a role, but it should sit within a more diversified plan.

- Use paid social only where age targeting, platform rules and campaign content are appropriate.
- Use BVOD, SVOD/AVOD, cinema and OOH to maintain broader fame and reach.
- Use search, SEO, landing pages and CRM for active decision moments.
- Use creators and ambassadors for proof, not pressure.
- Use event sign-ups, open days, callbacks, trials, taster sessions or appointments as practical conversion points.

Adults and households: reassure and multiply

Parents, carers and adult influencers should be planned as primary audiences, not an afterthought.

- Use BVOD/SVOD/linear TV for family and household-level reassurance.
- Use OOH for shared local presence and public credibility.
- Use radio/audio around daily routines and commuting.
- Use search and content to answer practical questions.
- Use paid social for parents and adult decision influencers, especially when under-16 paid social reach is restricted.

Measurement framework

The measurement model should move beyond platform metrics such as paid-social impressions, video views and retargeting pools. The new model should combine brand, behavioural and conversion signals.

- Brand reach: OOH impacts, Route data where applicable, cinema admissions or TVRs, TV/BVOD/SVOD reach and frequency, audio reach and contextual digital reach.
- Brand uplift: awareness, consideration, trust, relevance, parent/carer reassurance, cultural fit and "I can see myself there" measures.
- Behavioural uplift: branded search, direct traffic, QR scans, short URL visits, event page views, prospectus downloads, store visits, content engagement and call-back requests.
- Conversion: enquiries, applications, registrations, bookings, open-event attendance, trial sign-ups, purchases, enrolments or appointments, depending on the brand objective.
- Influence: parent engagement, adviser or teacher resource use, community partner activity, creator content engagement and CRM progression.

The important shift is to measure mental availability before the conversion window. A 15-year-old or parent might not act immediately, but the campaign can still shape what feels familiar, trusted and possible later.

Budget implications

Brands that have relied heavily on TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat or YouTube for early youth reach should start reallocating test budget before Spring 2027.

- Move a greater share of early-awareness budget into OOH, cinema, linear TV, BVOD, SVOD/AVOD, audio, contextual video and community partnerships.
- Keep paid social for 16+ audiences, parents/carers and adult influencers, but avoid relying on it as the core under-16 reach layer.
- Invest in creative assets that can travel across big-screen, public-space and digital environments.
- Build landing pages, search strategy and CRM journeys that capture the demand created by offline and large-screen media.
- Ring-fence budget for measurement, especially brand uplift, search uplift, geo-testing and conversion analysis.

Creative principles

The creative brief should shift from "stop the scroll" to "start the conversation".

- Be public: design creative that works in the real world, not just in a feed.
- Be household-friendly: create messages that young people can connect with and adults can trust.
- Be useful: explain the next step clearly.
- Be culturally grounded: understand youth culture without forcing youth language.
- Be local where possible: show real places, real routes, real people and real communities.
- Be distinctive: use consistent assets across OOH, cinema, TV, BVOD, SVOD, audio, search and owned channels.
- Be compliant: be transparent with influencer content and avoid pressure mechanics with younger audiences.

The JACK RYAN point of view

The under-16 social media ban will not end youth marketing. It will end the assumption that youth and family marketing can be built around paid social by default.

For brands, especially those in further and higher education, recruitment, skills and training, the task is to build trust before the decision moment and to make the brand visible in the environments that young people, families and influencers actually share.

That means more emphasis on OOH, cinema, BVOD, SVOD/AVOD, audio, contextual digital, search, partnerships and credible creator proof. It means planning for households as well as individuals. It means building fame before demand capture. And it means measuring not only clicks, but memory, confidence, search behaviour and conversion over time.

The strategic shift is clear: **from targeting young people in feeds to becoming visible in their world.**

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