

Supporting our young Mob through social media

By AUNTY TJALAMINU MIA

Kaya ngulluk — Kayaan Tjalaminu Mia niit Ngung ngulkak waarniny quoppadaar Wer ngullup nop, Yok wer-Koollungh

I speak in Noongar language. Here is the English translation:

Kaya everyone – Aunty TJ here

I hope you are doing well, especially our youth.

You've probably heard that the government is thinking about banning social media for young ones. They're still discussing what the age limit should be – perhaps 14 but maybe as old as 16.

The idea is to protect teens from being harmed by social media. It's true that some worra (not good) things happen online. Kids can get bullied by their peers or sometimes targeted by older people who want to exploit them. They can also get distracted from healthy activities, like family time, exercise, homework and sleep. And they can get exposed to biased and untrue information, unrealistic body images, and racism.

As a grandmother and great-grandmother, I do have my concerns about social media, but I also think we need to reflect before we clamp down too hard.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids, online platforms can be a way to connect with Elders and Mob and to get strength from culture.

I want to tell you about my experience with Aunty TJ TikTok, a project developed at the CBPATSISP to support and empower young people.

After the failed referendum last year on the Voice to Parliament, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of all ages experienced an increase in racism. It was like the vote gave the racists in the community encouragement to speak their prejudices out loud. There were reports that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school children were targets of bullying about the result by their peers, making them feel profoundly excluded from Australian society.

A year on from the referendum vote, now is a good time to reflect on what we have achieved with Aunty TJ TikTok series, which aims to strengthen our young Mob's pride in their cultural identity and connection to Country and community, sending warm, supportive video messages that reinforce hope and resilience and promote mental and physical wellbeing for our young people. In these messages I and other Elders, cultural knowledge holders and



Aunty TJ with Mark Nannup and Taleah Ugle, two of the members of the Aboriginal Youth Advisory Group to Aunty TJ TikTok.

healers aim to counter-balance the deficit discourse that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are often exposed to.

When I say young people I don't only mean children and teenagers. Our videos are also meant for young ones in their 20s and 30s, who are at uni or working and might have families of their own. If they have come through those earlier years safely, then they are walking towards a settled life and towards their own leadership and being Elders in the future. They also need messages of cultural strength and pride.

We have now produced more than 100 TikToks, including interviews with First Nations leaders such as Professor Pat Dudgeon from the CBPATSISP, Joe Williams, the founder of The Enemy Within, and international academics such as Dr Mark Standing Eagle Baez, a descendant of the Mohawk and Pawnee people in the USA, to teach culturally appropriate self-care.

In less than a year we have collected an extraordinary 5,000-plus followers and each video on average is watched more than 5000 times. We have had more than 23,000 likes. That is a lot of positivity to counteract any harmful messaging! And it is just the start because the videos often get shared on other social platforms including Facebook and X. As you might expect we get some racist comments, but overall, I have been overwhelmed by the positive response – not just the numbers but the wonderful, encouraging comments people leave online.

We chose the TikTok video sharing platform because of its popularity with young users.

It was a steep learning curve for me, but these experiences have shown me the power of speaking to our young people in the online spaces where they actually hang out.

That's why I think a social media ban for those in their early teens may not be the best approach. I do not believe a ban would protect young people from racism, because the racists will just find other ways to spread their hate – they always do. But it might stop young people from accessing messages of support and pride in culture, like Aunty TJ TikTok and the other Elders and community members who go online to reach out.

This is my feeling and it is reinforced by research. In August I was at Parliament House in Canberra for a symposium led by Professor Jo Robinson from the youth mental health group Orygen. In a large survey, she found that young people were exposed to dangerous messages on social media promoting suicide as a way out, but that those from groups that are sometimes marginalised – including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and also young ones who identify as LGBTIQSB+ – social media can offer positive connection with peers and role models and the opportunity to discuss self-harm and suicide safely, which they might not be able to do anywhere else.

It is time for the big tech companies, which make so much money from unregulated

social media, to step up with some practical solutions. If they are motivated to help, they will find ways to make it safer for young people to be online.

These companies need a code of ethics, not just about messages and content and age access, but really addressing the role of these platforms in people's lives.

Social media is defining how young people are developing their relationships and some

Elders have told me they are concerned at the amount of time young people spend on their screens, which can pull them away from cultural connections and learning.

We could take a strengths-based approach and start to build a social media world that encourages and empowers young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mob.

So please scan the QR code in the image and have a look what we're doing with Aunty TJ TikTok. And don't forget to comment underneath – we would love to hear what you think.

Yarn Boodawaan; Talk again soon

Aunty Tjalaminu Mia is a Research Fellow at the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) at the University of Western Australia. She is a Menang Goreng Wadjari Noongar woman. Her connection to Country is lower south-west, Great Southern region, Western Australia. Aunty TJ has worked for over four decades in government departments, local grassroots community services, education and academia, social justice and human rights and the Stolen Generations, focused on healing, empowerment and building capacity for leadership and self-determination. She was awarded the Community Person of the Year WA during NAIDOC Week 2012.

Aunty TJ is on TikTok!

@AuntyTJ

In light of the outcome of the referendum, our newly launched TikTok platform is committed to fostering support and resilience. Aunty TJ is at the heart of it, sharing her cultural strength and wisdom. Additionally, an Aboriginal Youth Advisory Group contributes by sharing ideas, forming a partnership that enhances the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

5 Reasons to Follow Aunty TJ

- To celebrate Indigenous culture, building a positive sense of identity
- To discover messages of healing and resilience
- To maintain and strengthen connections to Country
- To connect in a culturally aware online space, fostering understanding and support
- To discover the fresh perspectives of Indigenous youth, sparking new insights

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention