

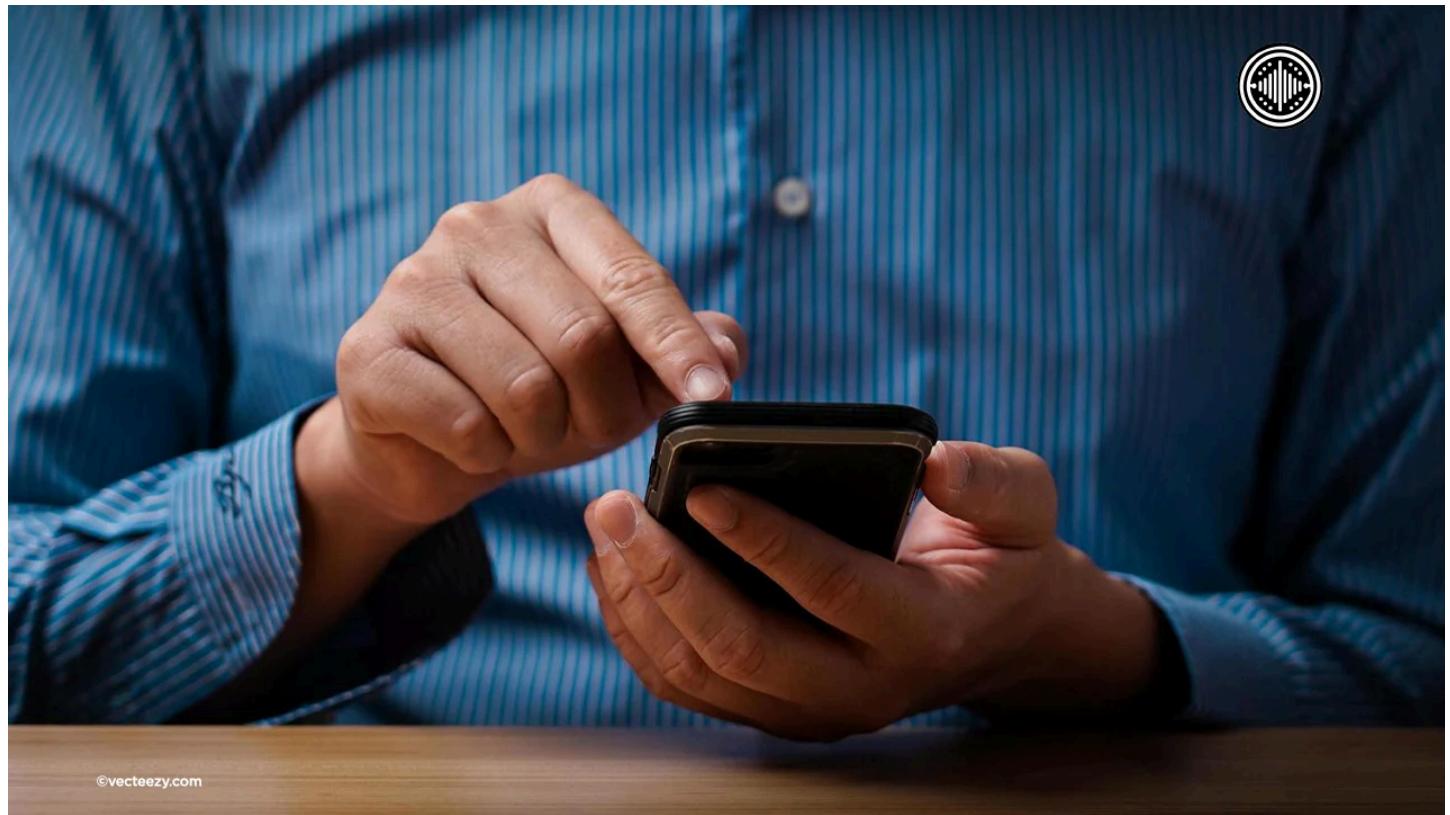
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Government Crackdown on Online Content Spurs Surge in VPN Use Across UK

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The latest phase of the UK's Online Safety Act, introduced on 25 July, has prompted a marked rise in the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), as internet users attempt to bypass new restrictions requiring age verification for accessing adult websites. Data from app stores and search trends confirm that many are turning to VPNs to avoid sharing personal information online.

Under the new rules, individuals must verify their age using credit card details, an official ID such as a passport, or by uploading a facial image for artificial intelligence (AI) analysis. The measures were introduced with the stated aim of protecting children and

deterring online predators. However, the rollout has triggered a backlash, with critics warning that the legislation risks undermining trust in government and further widening the gap between lawmakers and the public.

Figures from Apple's App Store show that, as of 29 July, five of the top ten free apps in the UK were VPN services. Google Trends also recorded a sharp increase in searches for "VPN", particularly during late-night hours, suggesting a growing desire to circumvent the new restrictions discreetly.

While the protection of minors is widely regarded as a legitimate objective, questions remain over the broader consequences of the legislation. Platforms fearing heavy fines have extended content restrictions beyond adult material, prompting concerns about overreach and unintended censorship. These developments align with earlier warnings from the Institute of Economic Affairs, which criticised the Act for its lack of clarity and scope creep.

The surge in VPN adoption echoes behavioural patterns seen in other areas where excessive regulation has driven users underground. In recent years, smokers have increasingly turned to the black market in response to punitive taxation. Similarly, affordability checks in the gambling sector have caused many punters to abandon licensed operators in favour of offshore alternatives. In both cases, compliance has been replaced by workaround behaviour.

Experts note that reliance on tools such as VPNs creates its own risks. While they offer a way to maintain online privacy, they also open access to unregulated websites, illegal streaming services, and other online spaces beyond UK jurisdiction. Downloading unverified VPNs can also expose users to fraud or malware.

The Government has insisted that personal data collected during the verification process will be kept secure. However, public confidence remains low. Recent data breaches, including the leak of information on thousands of Afghan nationals and Co-op customers, have reinforced public hesitancy to share sensitive documents with websites of questionable repute.

The implementation of the Online Safety Act has now become another example of well-meaning policy producing unintended outcomes. By attempting to exert tighter control over the internet, the state appears to have driven more people to conceal their digital activity, eroding the culture of open compliance that once defined British civic life.

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