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UK VPN Use Surges Amid Backlash Over New Online Safety Act

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Following the enforcement of the Online Safety Act 2023 on **25 July 2025**, VPN (Virtual

Private Network) usage in the UK has skyrocketed as many internet users seek to bypass newly mandated age-verification systems on adult, social media, and other “harmful content” platforms. The sudden surge underscores growing concerns over privacy and freedom in the digital age.

The Online Safety Act obliges platforms hosting adult or potentially harmful content—such as pornography, self-harm, or disordered eating material—to implement robust age verification for users based in the UK. Methods may include biometric verification, credit card checks, photo ID matching, or mobile network authentication. Failure to comply could result in fines of up to £18 million or 10 percent of a company’s global revenue. The UK’s media regulator, Ofcom, began rigorous enforcement of these rules, prompting many sites to implement age gates for UK-based traffic.

The public reaction was immediate. VPNs that conceal users’ location are now a quick fix, allowing UK IP addresses to appear foreign, bypassing age restrictions entirely. **Proton VPN** alone reported a staggering **1,400 percent hourly increase in UK sign-ups** shortly after the legislation took effect, and several other providers—Nord Security and Super Unlimited included—tracked similar spikes. Proton even overtook ChatGPT to become the most downloaded free app in the UK App Store over the weekend.

Google Trends data shows a more-than-tenfold increase in searches for “VPN” within the UK, matching the timeline of enforcement. VPN apps now dominate app-store charts, clearly reflecting nationwide efforts to dodge invasive identity verification measures.

Critics warn the Act’s mechanisms may compromise individual privacy, forcing users to submit sensitive personal information to unknown third parties. Some independent technology experts appealed directly to public discourse: Anthony Rose, co-creator of BBC iPlayer, wrote that “people just turn on a VPN and outwit them” after commenting on how quickly VPNs can be installed.

At the political level, Reform UK leader **Nigel Farage** labelled the Act “dystopian” and pledged its repeal, arguing it could push vulnerable youth onto VPNs—and even the dark web—in search of unfiltered content. He compared it unfavourably to censorship regimes,

and while noting privacy supporters' calls for change, acknowledged no alternative regulatory plan currently exists.

Despite widespread backlash—a petition to repeal the Act has amassed well over 280,000 signatures—the government maintains that age verification is essential to protect minors. Ofcom emphasises that while VPNs may undermine enforcement, platforms are legally required to discourage work—arounds, including VPN-based circumvention.

With privacy-conscious Britons adapting swiftly and political opposition mounting, the Online Safety Act faces immediate pressure both online and in parliament.