

A hand holding a smartphone displaying a social media feed with various images and a heart icon. The background is a solid red color.

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

June 2024



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Executive Summary

The internet and digital spaces are inextricably intertwined with young people's lives and everyday activity. While online spaces – including social media – do pose distinct safety risks, equally, they are also an integral source of information, connection and community for many young people. The introduction of further age restrictions on social media and age verification will undoubtedly have an immense impact on young people's interactions and activity.

While the Y does not hold a formal stance on age restrictions and social media, we are concerned that the current debate playing out in politics and media does not include the voices of young people, the group most impacted by the proposed changes. This is a symptom of a larger systemic issue of young people being a subject spoken *about* in policy development and media, rather than being perceived as capable and qualified experts in their own lives that decision makers should be working *with*.

Further, while it is encouraging that the safety of children online is a community priority, the approach to introduce age restrictions for social media focuses on regulating the child, rather than regulating the platforms or building capabilities. Young people should be consulted in the appropriate approach, and they should be supported by continued investment in tailored digital literacy and safety education will play a critical role in ensuring young people have the skills to navigate the digital world safely.

Our submission includes two recommendations for the Committee:

1. Australian governments ensure they genuinely consult with young people about social media age restrictions to avoid the risk of creating ineffective and disempowering policy. This work should be led by the eSafety Youth Council and the eSafety Commissioner, complemented by a broader, age-appropriate, youth-led consultation with young people ages 17 and younger.
2. The Australian Government continue to invest to the development and dissemination of co-designed, evidenced-based digital capability resources and training as a primary mechanism to keep children and young people safe in digital environments.

About the Y

The Y (formerly the 'YMCA') in Australia is a not-for-profit organisation, operating in more than 680 communities, with 11,500 employees and over 16 million visits to our programs and facilities over the past year.

As a not-for-profit movement that exists to support children, young people and the community across every state and territory in Australia; and across 120 countries globally, the Y is committed to supporting people from all backgrounds and walks of life to reach their full potential, with dignity.

The Y's mission is to empower children, young people and communities Australia-wide to build a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world, where every person can thrive in body, mind and spirit.

The Y welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to *Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society*. Our submission responds to the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media, as per the Committee's Terms of Reference. Specifically, we focus on the need to genuinely consult with young people before introducing new restrictions and the integral role of digital safety education as a primary mechanism to protect young people.

The genuine involvement of young people

Recommendation

1. Australian governments ensure they genuinely consult with young people about social media age restrictions to avoid the risk of creating ineffective and disempowering policy. This work should be led by the eSafety Youth Council and the eSafety Commissioner, complemented by a broader, age-appropriate, youth-led consultation with young people ages 17 and younger.

The internet and digital spaces are inextricably intertwined with young people's lives and everyday activity. On average, young people ages 12-17 years spend 14.4 hours a week online – including on social media – using a range of activities, including researching topics of interest, connecting with friends, watching videos and movies, playing games and accessing news.¹ While the Y does not hold a formal stance on whether further age restrictions and age verification should be implemented or not, it is important to highlight the great impact their introduction would have on many young people's lives, and as such, emphasise the need for their voices to be central in the discussion.

Last month, the Y provided a submission to the *Inquiry into civics education, participation and engagement* highlighting young people's growing disconnect and disillusionment with government. A key driver of this discontent is that young people do not feel their voices, interests and concerns are recognised by leaders or reflected in policy development. Recent research² analysing how young people were engaged in policy development and depicted in Federal and state policy between 2014-2021 supports this sentiment, finding that young people were frequently and persistently depicted through an adult lens (e.g., as 'risk takers'), and that opinions and perspectives from consultation with young people were generally included on a limited basis in the final policy product.

Similarly, news media does not adequately include and represent the views of young people. Research³ has found that young Australians are 10 times more likely to appear in news images than they are to be quoted in the news story. Further, the analysis demonstrated that just one per cent of news stories directly quoted a young person,

¹ eSafety Commissioner. (2021). *The digital lives of Aussie teens*. Available at [The digital lives of Aussie teens.pdf \(esafety.gov.au\)](#).

² Waite, C., Walsh, L., Gallo Cordoba, B., Cutler, B., & Bao Huynh, T. (2024). About them, without them? Figures of youth in Australian policy 2014–2021. *Journal of Youth Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2325447>.

³ Notley, T., M. Dezuanni, and H.F., Zhong. (2019). *The Inclusion and Representation of Young People in the Australian News Media*, Western Sydney University and Queensland University of Technology.

whereas 11 per cent of news stories included an adult relaying young people’s needs, experiences and views (including parents, experts and police).

The Y is concerned that the current debate around age restrictions on social media playing out in both media and politics is missing the voices and perspectives of young people, the group most impacted by the proposed reforms. While the narrative has been shaped by adults’ perceptions of what’s in children’s best interests, at the time of writing the government and media are insufficiently upholding children’s rights to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them, as per the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Social media is a nuanced topic. We see the complexity of young people’s perspectives on the subject firsthand through submissions on [WhyNot](#), our digital platform that provides young people a safe and trusted environment to submit their thoughts and amplify their unique points of view. See Appendix A for a sample of recent (June 2024) submissions on social media and age restrictions. We also know through our work that social media is an important space for young people to connect with like-minded peers, access information and participate in community advocacy.

Children are vulnerable, yes, but that also means that social media can be a saving grace in an unfair society. Think of the young, closeted transgender teenager who follows trans-affirming social media accounts, or the young chronically ill teenager who can stay connected with their friends online when they are having a pain flare up.

- Excerpt from young person’s submission on WhyNot⁴

The debate looms large on whether increased age restrictions on social media will even be feasible or effective in promoting positive mental health, or if it may have unintended consequences on limiting young people’s opportunity to build their cyber preparedness before the age of 17. Regardless, we argue that without genuine inclusion of young people under the age of 17 in the conversation, government risks introducing policy or legislation that will not meet community need.

The eSafety Commissioner has an established eSafety Youth Council who have supported the development of solutions to online safety issues that are affecting young people. We recommend that the eSafety Youth Council should be leading the conversation on age restrictions of social media use, complemented by a broader, age-appropriate, youth-led consultation with young people ages 17 and younger. This would support the findings of the research report commissioned by the eSafety Commissioner on how to best engage young people on the work of online safety, and the commitments of the Office for Youth’s *Engage!* Strategy to engage with and listen to young people.

⁴ See *Think Bigger* in appendix for full submission.

Cyber and digital safety education

Recommendation

2. The Australian Government continue to invest to the development and dissemination of co-designed, evidenced-based digital capability resources and training as a primary mechanism to keep children and young people safe in digital environments.

The world is increasingly reliant on technology and digital spaces. As such, it is critical that as a community we are both skilled to benefit from the opportunities that technology provides, and knowledgeable and prepared to respond to the risks and minimise harm. This aligns with the United Nations' General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, detailing States responsibilities to provide oversight on how children fare in the digital world.

While it is encouraging to see the safety of children online is a community priority, the approach to introduce age restrictions for social media focuses on regulating the child, rather than regulating the platforms or building capabilities.

“Rather than shielding young users by raising the access age, let’s empower them through critical engagement. Equip them with the tools to navigate social media with confidence and discernment. This approach fosters resilience and prepares them to be thoughtful digital citizens.”

- Excerpt from young person’s submission on WhyNot⁵

“[Young people] want independence balanced with an appropriate level of guidance depending on their age and capacities, and they want the freedom balanced with protection, so they can explore all the opportunities the online world has to offer.”

- Findings from eSafety Commissioner youth consultation report⁶

Recent research⁷ led by the University of Sydney engaged young people (12-17) and parents and carers to investigate emerging online safety issues and the surrounding regulatory frameworks in which platforms operated. The findings demonstrated that

⁵ See *From Profiles to Personas – Redefining Identity in the Age of Social Media* in appendix for full submission.

⁶ Moody, L., Marsden, L., Nguyen, B., & Third, A. (2021). *Consultations with young people to inform the eSafety Commissioner’s Engagement Strategy for Young People*, Young and Resilient Research Centre, Western Sydney University: Sydney, p. 5.

⁷ Humphry, J., Boichak, O., Hutchinson, J. (2023). *Emerging Online Safety Issues – Co-creating Social Media with Young People – Research Report*. The University of Sydney. Available at [Emerging Online Safety Issues: Co-creating social media education with Young People \(usyd.edu.au\)](https://www.usyd.edu.au/research/emerging-online-safety-issues-co-creating-social-media-education-with-young-people).

young people and parents and carers alike want government to do more to support young people's online safety by:

- Making platforms more accountable for reducing online harm and providing more privacy and safety features for young people to safeguard themselves, and
- Educating the public about online safety to prevent or deal with problems in the online world.

Recent investment in co-designed, evidence-based digital resources and education from the Australian Government – through the eSafety Commissioner and community grants programs – have been a welcome step toward building the literacy and capability of children and young people in digital environment. The Y urges governments to continue to invest in this work and its dissemination to ensure each child has equal opportunity to be informed about online safety.

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Appendix A: Submissions from young people on WhyNot on social media

WhyNot is a digital platform that provides young people a safe and trusted environment to submit their thoughts and amplify their unique points of view.

It isn't our fault, so stop treating it like it is

The trouble with things like age limits on accessing social media is, in my mind, two-fold.

Firstly, restricting those under certain ages (such as 16) from accessing social media seems like a nightmare of a policy to implement. How would this even be enforced? A check-box that people can just lie about? Officials stalking profiles finding hints of people are under 18? Arguably, the only thing this will do is make social media something more appealing, creating a toxic culture of rule-breaking and exclusivity, just like with alcohol, or porn, or vaping.

But secondly, I want to be clear, social media being bad isn't our fault. There are plenty of terrible individuals from our generation on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, but they're just users. We aren't the executives of Meta creating toxic spirals for self-image that can get away with it because 'they're just a platform, not a publisher'. We aren't the government officials who failed to address this problem year-on-year and refused to stand up to the big corporations behind this actual problem. We're honestly just the people wanting to chat to our friends some more. So truthfully, if you want someone to punish, stop looking at us.

Toyo (he/they), 22 VIC

From Profiles to Personas – Redefining Identity in the Age of Social Media

In today's digital age, are we the ones navigating social media, or is it subtly redefining our perceptions, relationships, and who we are at our core?

Instead of focusing on the superficial layers of these platforms including likes, followers, and curated feeds; we need to consider the deeper impact on our identities and interactions. Social media often acts as a mirror, reflecting not just our desired self-image but our collective societal values. It prompts us to ask: Are we using these

platforms to genuinely express ourselves, or to conform to an ever-evolving digital culture?

This mirror effect challenges us to reconcile our real and virtual selves, pushing for authenticity that goes beyond the screen. The shallow interactions that are equated with “friending” and “following” have resulted in the need to redefine what connection means online. Rather than shielding young users by raising the access age, let’s empower them through critical engagement. Equip them with the tools to navigate social media with confidence and discernment. This approach fosters resilience and prepares them to be thoughtful digital citizens.

By reimagining the role of social media, we can harness it not just as a platform for personal expression but as a catalyst for collective growth and positive change.

Jyotsna (she/her), 17 NSW

Think Bigger

Raising the age of social media access is a band aid solution to wide-spread issues. What happens on social media is reflective of the society we live in – discrimination, racism, queerphobia, ableism, fatphobia, power imbalances and bullies all existed long before social media was created.

Children are vulnerable, yes, but that also means that social media can be a saving grace in an unfair society. Think of the young closeted transgender teenager who follows trans-affirming social media accounts, or the young chronically ill teenager who can stay connected with their friends online when they are having a pain flare up.

Instead of banning social media for people under sixteen, why not stamp out discrimination (in schools and in society more broadly), invest in mental health care for all, have peer support workers at schools for kids to talk to when they’re having a rough time (I know I didn’t find the sweet chaplain who was also a grandma, someone I felt I could honestly and openly talk to at school about mental health- I didn’t relate to her).

Teenagers will find ways to get around a ban, anyway. Let’s think bigger!

Anonymous, 26 VIC

