

eSafety Youth Council

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

Dear Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society,

We are the eSafety Youth Council (Council), 17 young people with diverse lived experiences, gender identities and cultures, representing all states and territories across Australia. The Council gives young Australians a direct line to the Australian Government and eSafety, ensuring young people remain central in the decision-making process for online safety policies and programs impacting them, now and into the future.

As members of the Council, we would like to share our unique lived experiences and insights about the influence and impact of social media on young Australians.

Young people feel a disconnect between adults' perceptions of our online worlds and our everyday experiences. We move seamlessly between online and offline experiences, as we don't perceive a divide between online and 'real' worlds. This was evident in research by the Young and Resilient Research Centre, [Reimagining online safety education through the eyes of young people](#).

As digital natives, we understand intimately the complexities and nuances of social media, and as key users, we will be among the first and most impacted. Article 12 of the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) states that children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account. Incorporating youth voice into this inquiry process is therefore essential, as it will ensure policies and initiatives are relevant, effective, and reflective of our unique perspectives and needs.

Social media is important to us, but it's complicated.

Social media is an everyday part of our lives. We understand that you may think it has a negative impact on our lives, but there are so many benefits too. It is one of the primary ways we communicate with each other, and we enjoy the benefits of being able to easily connect and interact with friends and family, particularly for [First Nations young people](#) who are part of vast and complex communities across Australia, and those of us who have friends and families living overseas or are no longer nearby. Social media is often used to maintain and navigate these community connections and relationships. As emerging adults, we also use social media to build our professional networks and gain access to opportunities and

resources to benefit our futures. Social media is an integral tool for us to stay connected to the world around us.

Social media can be a place of learning and knowledge for us. We appreciate the ease and efficiency of accessing a range of local and international news via social media platforms, allowing us to stay informed and updated with events from around the world. We also utilise social media platforms to seek new information and ideas that interest, educate and inspire us, benefiting from the exposure to a wide range of sources and perspectives that we wouldn't be able to access otherwise. With social media, we can learn new skills and learn from more knowledgeable people, allowing our hobbies and interests to thrive.

Social media can also be a great tool for those of us who are developing and validating our identities. It can be a place of refuge where we can safely connect with peers, express ourselves freely and foster a like-minded community, an important aspect of social media for queer young people and young people with disability. Queer young people are more likely to feel more comfortable being themselves online than in person, which was evident in eSafety's [‘Tipping the balance’](#) research report on LGBTIQ+ teens' experiences negotiating connection, self-expression, and harm online. We can choose to do so anonymously; in a way we cannot experience in the “real” world. eSafety's report on [‘The digital lives of young people with disability’](#), found that young people with disability use social media to connect with peers, expand their social networks beyond their immediate surrounds, and to seek emotional support online. Social media enables us to seek and access support from our communities, thus positively impacting our wellbeing and sense of belonging in the world.

Despite the positive impacts of social media for young people, we understand we are also vulnerable to the risks and negative impacts of social media. We experience highs and lows when using social media, and for a young person who is navigating social, emotional, and physical changes and challenges, self-regulation of social media use can be tricky. The feeling of exclusion can be compelling, leading to young people feeling like they must have, use, and regularly post on a range of social media platforms. Social media is fully integrated into everyday life, and there is an expectation to use it to be connected and immerse ourselves in society. As regular users of social media, we are, however, at risk of experiencing cyberbullying, online harm, exposure to harmful or illegal content, or violent and offensive media, so it is important to protect us, but we need to be involved in developing the solutions.

Age verification could work, but will it be effective at protecting us?

Age verification could be an effective tool to offer more age-appropriate online experiences for children and young people as it can limit advertising of inappropriate content, misinformation, disinformation, and potential radicalisation, however, it should not be the Government's main priority.

Young people are strong-willed, determined and tech-savvy, and we feel that young people may still find a way around these restrictions. For example, young people could use VPNs or generative AI tools to simply ‘beat’ the age verification system. We question if restricting young people’s access will truly address the root cause of the negative influences and impacts of social media.

The bigger issue Government should focus on is the lack of concern for safety and broader socio-ethical implications from the Big Tech industry and their lack of transparency and accountability impacting young people’s experiences online. Government should prioritise and regulate the incorporation of [Safety by Design](#) features in the Big Tech industry’s digital products and platforms to ensure the burden of safety doesn’t fall solely on us and our families.

If age verification technologies were implemented for social media, we have significant concerns about the reliability of security and privacy features, particularly the storage and retention of our sensitive and personal information if suitable technologies are not utilised. Having seen the impact of security breaches and data leaks, how can we be assured we are protected if young people are asked to verify their identities online?

We’ve got some ideas.

By incorporating our voice, Government can genuinely support young Australians to have safer and positive online experiences now and into the future.

The following are our recommendations for you to consider:

- **Regulate social media platforms and the broader Big Tech industry to include Safety by Design features in all digital products and services.** Social media companies should be made accountable and responsible for the safety of all users. Alternative or modified age-appropriate apps and platforms with appropriate features could be offered to children and young people, like YouTube Kids and Messenger Kids.
- **Prioritise education for children and young people, as well as their families.** It should be the responsibility of families, parents, and young people themselves to regulate what media they can and cannot consume, but they need to be afforded the appropriate knowledge and tools to do so. Relevant and comprehensive education should be readily accessible and focus on supporting young people and families to encourage open dialogue to develop digital literacy, online safety skills, and help-seeking behaviours suited to each young person. Age verification tools cannot account for evolving maturity levels and differing capabilities among young people the way education can.

- **Review the definition of social media, with consideration of which platforms are included in any age verification reforms.** Messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, Messenger, iMessage and Discord, should not be included in age verification reforms. Social media platforms and messaging apps are distinctive from each other. While social media platforms have an undefined set of users accessing and interacting with content from all other users, messaging apps have a definite pre-defined list and destination of who the messages will go to. Their differing risk profiles should be considered.

Now it's over to you.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have the right to:

- receive and share information
- meet with other children and young people
- join groups and organisations
- reliable information from the mass media.

For most young people, social media is a tool to exercise these rights and it is important to remember that social media is neither good nor bad – but rather the intention and execution in using this tool defines its impact.

Government cannot meaningfully represent the diverse perspectives and experiences of Australia's youth without our voices. The considerations of our insights within this inquiry into social media and Australian society are crucial for decisions that should be made in the best interests of the stakeholders, us.

Yours sincerely,

Aditi, Arjun, Elena, Elliot, Minh, Raghunaath, Tracey, and William

On behalf of the eSafety Youth Council

This letter articulates the personal insights and perspectives of Youth Council members and was crafted with the support of eSafety staff.