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Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

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# Submission

## JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

### ANZAED

Australia & New Zealand Academy for Eating Disorders (ANZAED) is the peak body representing and supporting all professionals working in the field of eating disorders prevention, treatment, and research. Recently, ANZAED members participated in the **Social Media and Eating Disorder Round Table** with Hon. Zoe Daniel.

We make this submission on behalf of our members.

### Rationale

Social media has become an integral part of everyday life for many Australians, influencing communication, information dissemination, and social interaction. While it offers numerous benefits, it also presents significant challenges, including mental health impacts, particularly related to eating disorders. This submission aims to address these issues and propose strategies to maximise the positive aspects of social media while mitigating its adverse effects on our community.

### Terms of Reference Response

We submit responses under the following areas of the Terms of Reference.

#### *(a) the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media*

- **Increase the minimum age of social media use to 16 years.** Currently the minimum age is 13 years. Extending the minimum age will afford children the additional time to develop without the influence of social media. The teenage years are the most prevalent age of onset for an eating disorder in Australia.
- **Implement a regime of mandatory age verification for all social media platforms.** Strong age verification processes ensure compliance with the minimum age criteria and reduces children's exposure to age-inappropriate material.

#### *(d) the algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health*

- **Transparency in algorithms.** Social media algorithms are designed to promote user engagement, thereby amplifying inherent human biases for learning from influential or in-group members. This amplification often promotes misinformation and polarisation as it does not discern the accuracy of the information. Social media platforms be required to be transparent about their algorithms with regular publicly available algorithm risk audits from independent bodies and with consequences for non-compliance including appropriate fines or other punitive measures for effective deterrence.
- **Algorithm reset function.** Due to the loop of content reinforcing appearance ideals, control of eating, etc., the algorithm can reinforce challenges related to development of an eating disorder and treatment seeking and recovery. An option to quickly and easily reset the algorithm will allow for users to control the content they see and engage with. This is an important option for prevention of symptoms and for use during treatment.
- **Implement a shield function.** Social media platforms to be required to create a shield function for users to opt-out of specific types of content which may be harmful.
- **Remove harmful content.** Social media platforms to be required to promptly remove harmful pro-eating disorder content from their platforms on identification.

#### *(e) other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material*

- **Improve media literacy.** Roll out evidence-based programs to increase social media literacy and reduce the risk of mental health

problems in children.

- **Dramatic increase support for parents.** Provide funding to support the development and distribution of new and existing parent resources to help parents support their children's social media use to reduce eating disorder risk and body image concerns.
- **Greater training and support for schools.** Incorporate body image and eating disorder harm minimisation content into both pre-service training and ongoing professional learning to ensure early years educators, primary and secondary school teachers, and health professionals are adequately prepared to support children and young people.

*(f) any related matters*

- **Availability of data for researchers.** Currently, there is very limited access to social media use data for researchers to understand the impact of social media on mental health. Social media platforms to be required to provide free access to their data to researchers in a manner that is unbiased, accessible, and easily interpreted. Ensuring access will help to improve understanding and inform policy.
- **Implement the other recommendations** from the recent [Social Media and Eating Disorders Roundtable](#)
- **Support an ongoing consortium.** Provide ongoing funding for a consortium of leading eating disorder and body image researchers, clinicians, public health lawyers and organisations to determine research and implementation priorities and discuss legislation (including reviews of the Privacy Act and the Online Safety Act 2021 (Cth)).

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