

Sample – Campaign 10

To the Members of the Australian Senate Committee on Environment and Communications,

I am writing to express my strong reservations regarding the proposed Social Media Minimum Age Bill. While the intent to protect young Australians from the potential harms of social media is commendable, the proposed legislation presents several critical issues that could outweigh its benefits. Here are the key criteria for opposition:

1. Feasibility and Enforcement Challenges Technical Limitations: The global nature of the internet and social media platforms complicates enforcement. Many platforms operate from countries outside Australia, making it difficult to ensure compliance with Australian law. The use of VPNs or other anonymity tools could easily bypass any age restrictions.

Verification Process: The bill does not clearly define how age verification should be conducted, potentially leading to significant privacy invasions through mandatory ID checks or biometric scans, which could affect users of all ages, not just minors.

2. Privacy Concerns Risk of Data Misuse: Collecting personal data for age verification purposes increases the risk of data breaches. Social media platforms already face criticism for their handling of user data; this bill could exacerbate these concerns by necessitating even more personal data collection.

Digital ID Backdoor: There's a sentiment, as seen on X, that this could be a covert move towards implementing a digital ID system, which raises significant privacy and surveillance issues.

3. Impact on Freedom of Speech and Access to Information Limiting Digital Participation: Social media platforms are not just for entertainment; they serve as platforms for education, political activism, and community building. Restricting access could limit young people's exposure to diverse ideas and opportunities for expression, potentially stifling their growth in a digital society.

Possible Censorship: There is a concern that this bill might set a precedent for further government control over internet content, potentially leading to censorship under the guise of protection.

4. Parental Rights and Responsibilities Overreach into Family Dynamics: The legislation could be seen as the state overstepping into the realm of parental control over their children's internet usage. Parents, not the government, should have the primary responsibility and authority in deciding what digital exposure is appropriate for their children.

5. Mental Health and Social Isolation Underground Usage: There's a risk that teens will find ways to access social media covertly, which could lead to more secretive behaviour and less open communication with parents about their online activities. This could actually increase harmful online behaviour rather than decrease it.

Loss of Support Networks: For some young people, social media provides a crucial support network, particularly in discussing issues related to mental health, identity, or belonging. An outright ban might isolate those who benefit from these connections.

6. Lack of Empirical Support Insufficient Research: The bill appears to be rushed without a comprehensive review of the potential impacts or effectiveness. There's a lack of conclusive evidence that an outright ban would achieve the desired outcomes, especially without addressing the root causes of social media's negative effects on youth.

7. Alternative Approaches Ignored Education and Literacy: Instead of a ban, there could be a greater emphasis on digital literacy and parental tools for managing online time. Programs that educate both children and parents on safe internet practices might yield better long-term results.

Platform Responsibility: Platforms could be encouraged to develop safer environments for younger users through better content moderation, parental controls, and age-appropriate content algorithms.

Conclusion While the aim to safeguard young Australians is understandable, this bill risks unintended consequences that might affect privacy, freedom of expression, and the digital rights of all Australians. It could also fail in its primary goal if not paired with comprehensive strategies that involve education, platform responsibility, and community support rather than outright bans.

I urge the committee to consider these points critically and explore alternative, less invasive, and more effective measures to ensure the online safety of Australian youth without compromising the broader digital freedoms and rights.

Sincerely,