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AGASA Submission: Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024

Introduction

This submission contains extensive research-based information about screen disorders and related conditions, and the associated risks and harms. The submission argues for regulatory measures to address persuasive design features in social media, and a minimum legal age for accessing social media. For a more extensive review of the mental health and developmental impacts of social media, please see the AGASA submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society.

Minimum age for access to social media

AGASA submits that Australian law should require social media companies to prevent children and young people under 16 from opening accounts in their own name. Such a law could be justified on numerous grounds: our primary concern as an organisation is the harms associated with overuse (including of games that are accessed via those platforms), but we can also point to the inappropriate content under-16s are likely to encounter and the associated risks of harm, as well as the dangers to wellbeing associated with cyberbullying.

Reports are emerging in other developed nations that support raising the age for social media use. For example, a 2024 [report](#) commissioned by the French government and led by a neurologist, Servane Mouton, and Amine Benyamina, the head of the psychiatry and addiction service at Paul-Brousse hospital, concluded that:

Screens have harmful consequences on several aspects of the somatic health of children and adolescents. In particular, the use of screens contributes, directly or indirectly, to sleep deficits, a sedentary lifestyle and lack of physical activity, obesity and all the chronic pathologies that result from it, as well as vision problems.

“We want [the industry] to know we’ve seen what they’re doing and we won’t let them get away with it.”

Screens have negative effects on children “in terms of their eyesight, their metabolism ... their intelligence, concentration and cognitive processes”.

Children need ... to be protected from the tech industry’s profit-driven “strategy of capturing children’s attention, using all forms of cognitive bias to shut children away on their screens, control them, re-engage them and monetise them”. “Algorithms that re-engage and stimulate the pleasure system and are built to avoid you losing interest in the content have a type of addictive dynamic.” (From Bousquet-Bérard & Pascal 2024 report [here](#) and Chrisafis, 2024, *Guardian* report [here](#)).

Although some might argue that regulating a minimum age for social media use is a restriction of children’s liberties and that children will be worse off because social media is a form of social connection that also keeps many abreast of current affairs, we note the following:

- There are well documented detriments associated with social media for some users. Whilst they may not impact all young users, they impact a substantial number.
- Bans on mobile phones in schools caused a large outcry because it was a restriction on children’s freedom, but there is no outcry now. What happened was predictable. Young people were unhappy for a few weeks and then did what teenagers are good at doing: they adapted. Within a short period students became used to their new circumstances and started connecting more face to face, and playing together face to face. Schools report better attention in class, better peer to peer engagement and fewer screen-related issues in class and playground.
- **In our view, changing rules around social media would likely have a similar effect: a period of transition and then students adapting and meeting their needs in new ways – connecting with peers face to face and via text message, email and video conferencing and finding other sources of news and current affairs.**
- Looking at the issue from a cost-benefit perspective, all of the benefits from social media can be obtained in other ways, and doing so negates the potential risks from social media.

Conclusion

In summary, AGASA submits there is an extensive body of evidence around the mental health and developmental impacts on children and teenagers arising from social media. This evidence has been established internationally, but also here in Australia (Marshall et al., 2024). Implementing a minimum age is a logical and sensible first step in supporting parents, children and teenagers. AGASA believes this sends a clear message to parents around the possible harms and opens the path for working with tech companies around structural change of their platforms, persuasive design, algorithms, and more robust parental controls.

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