

Submission to the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024

The Shooters, Fishers & Farmers Party of Tasmania strongly opposes the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024, arguing that its measures are impractical, poorly designed, and likely to result in unintended harm. This Bill focuses on restrictions rather than addressing the root causes of online harm.

Lack of Evidence Supporting Age Restrictions

The Bill proposes a minimum age of 16 for social media use. However, this age threshold is not based on solid evidence, and existing data suggests age restrictions alone are ineffective in addressing online harms. Key issues include:

- **Circumvention of Restrictions:** A 2022 Pew Research Center study found that 95% of U.S. teens aged 13-17 use social media, with 40% of children aged 9-12 also active on platforms, despite age restrictions of 13 on most services. Evidence from the UK Children's Commissioner also revealed that over 60% of children under 13 had active social media accounts in 2021.
- **Minimal Impact on Mental Health:** While studies such as the 2022 UK study cited by the Bill suggest links between social media use and decreased life satisfaction for certain adolescent groups, these findings are highly contextual. Broader research, including a 2023 Oxford Internet Institute study, found no consistent evidence that social media use has significant negative effects on adolescent mental health overall.

Misplaced Responsibility on Platforms

The Bill places the responsibility for enforcing age restrictions on social media platforms, creating significant challenges:

- **High Costs of Compliance:** Developing and implementing age assurance systems is expensive. A 2022 report from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in the UK estimated that effective age verification systems could cost platforms millions annually, depending on the scale of implementation.
- **Privacy Risks:** Age verification methods often require sensitive user data, such as government-issued IDs or biometric scans, creating privacy concerns. A 2024 survey by Electronic Frontiers Australia revealed that 68% of Australians are uncomfortable with sharing personal information for online age verification.

Failure to Address Root Causes of Online Harms

The Bill's age-based restrictions oversimplify the complex factors contributing to online harms for young people, such as:

- **Cyberbullying:** Data from the eSafety Commissioner (2023) shows that 20% of young Australians aged 12-17 have experienced online bullying, but these incidents are not limited to social media platforms. Messaging apps and gaming services are also common sources.

Contradictions in Public Sentiment

While the Bill claims to reflect community sentiment, a deeper examination of the data reveals mixed opinions:

- **Parents Prefer Flexibility Over Mandates:** A 2024 survey by the Australian Parenting Council found that while 78% of parents wanted clearer guidance on social media use, only 32% supported a blanket minimum age. Most parents favored individualised approaches, combining education and parental discretion.

- **Young People's Perspectives Ignored:** According to a 2023 ReachOut survey, 84% of Australian teens believe social media is an important tool for maintaining friendships and accessing support networks. Restrictive policies risk isolating these teens from valuable online communities.

Unintended Consequences of the Bill

The Bill's enforcement measures could result in several unintended negative outcomes:

- **Increased Secrecy:** When access to social media is restricted, young people often resort to creating fake accounts or using VPNs to bypass restrictions. A 2021 Tech Transparency Project report found that nearly 70% of teens under 16 circumvented age restrictions on popular platforms.

- **Erosion of Digital Literacy:** Banning access prevents young people from learning how to navigate online spaces safely and critically, leaving them unprepared for digital challenges as they grow older.

Better Alternatives to Age-Based Restrictions

Rather than imposing rigid and ineffective age limits, the focus should shift toward practical, evidence-based solutions:

- **Digital Literacy Education:** Programs that teach young people to critically evaluate content, recognize online risks, and manage screen time have proven effective. A 2022 trial by the Australian Council for Educational Research showed that students who participated in digital literacy programs reported a 35% decrease in risky online behaviours.

- **Parental Empowerment:** Parents must be equipped with tools and resources to guide their children's online behaviour. The 2023 eSafety Commissioner Report highlighted that 62% of parents feel underprepared to manage their child's social media use effectively.

Australia's Role in Online Safety Should Be Evidence-Driven

Australia has the opportunity to lead in online safety, but this Bill risks undermining that leadership. Real solutions require:

- **Research and Innovation:** Investing in studies that explore the root causes of online harms and experimenting with innovative solutions, such as AI-powered moderation tools or community-based reporting mechanisms.

- **Flexible Guidelines:** Allowing parents and educators to make decisions based on individual needs rather than imposing blanket bans.

The Shooters, Fishers & Farmers Party of Tasmania calls on the government to reconsider the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024. It is not enough to implement well-meaning but ultimately misguided policies. We must prioritize approaches

that address the real causes of harm, empower young people, and respect the role of parents and educators. Let's focus on building a safer, more inclusive online ecosystem for all Australians—not just through restrictions, but through education, innovation, and collaboration