

# Submission to the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 [Provisions]

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**Submitted by:** Adrian Murdoch, Minus18 Foundation

**Date:** November 21, 2024

Dear [Relevant Committee or Minister],

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024. As an organisation dedicated to the wellbeing and inclusion of LGBTQIA+ young people, we are deeply concerned about the unintended consequences of restricting social media access for individuals under the age of 16.

For LGBTQIA+ youth, social media is more than a communication tool—it is a lifeline to safety, connection, and affirmation. Our recent survey, which engaged nearly 1,000 LGBTQIA+ young people across Australia, reveals:

- **95.7%** of respondents rely on social media to access friends and emotional support.
- **91.5%** report that platforms, particularly Instagram, have been crucial for forming meaningful friendships with other queer people.
- **83%** fear that a ban on social media would sever them from their community and leave them feeling disconnected and isolated.

These findings underscore the critical role social media plays in supporting a demographic that already faces heightened risks of discrimination, rejection, and isolation.

## The Unique Challenges Faced by LGBTQIA+ Youth

LGBTQIA+ young people experience disproportionate rates of mental health challenges, with studies consistently showing that a lack of social support exacerbates these issues. Social media provides a vital space for them to:

- **Build peer networks:** Many LGBTQIA+ youth cannot safely access affirming friendships in their offline lives, particularly in rural or conservative areas. Social media bridges this gap.
- **Access identity-affirming resources:** Platforms connect them to educational materials, support services, and community organisations they may otherwise struggle to find.

- **Find representation and affirmation:** Seeing people like themselves online fosters a sense of belonging and helps them navigate their identities with pride.

Restricting access to these platforms risks increasing isolation, harming mental health, and removing a critical layer of support for an already vulnerable population.

## The Disproportionate Impact of a Ban

While the bill's intent to protect young people from harm is commendable, it inadvertently poses significant risks for LGBTQIA+ youth. Unlike their cisgender, heterosexual peers, LGBTQIA+ youth:

- Are more likely to lack supportive family environments, leaving social media as their primary source of connection.
- Face unique barriers to accessing offline community support, such as fear of discrimination or lack of local services.
- Are more likely to experience social isolation, which can compound mental health risks when disconnected from affirming online spaces.

## Recommendations

To ensure that the bill achieves its goal of safeguarding young people without unintended harm, we recommend:

1. **Strengthening online safety measures instead of restricting access:** Invest in tools that make platforms safer, such as improved reporting systems, community moderation, and education programs.
2. **Engaging with young people in policy design:** Include LGBTQIA+ youth voices in shaping legislation that directly affects their access to support.

## Conclusion

LGBTQIA+ young people rely on social media not just as a convenience but as an essential resource for safety, connection, and identity development. Restricting access will harm those who are already vulnerable and may exacerbate the very risks the bill aims to mitigate.

We urge the government to reconsider the provisions of this bill and to adopt a more nuanced approach that prioritises inclusion and accessibility for all young Australians.

Thank you for considering this submission. We welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence or participate in consultations to ensure the best outcomes for LGBTQIA+ young people.

Yours sincerely,

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