

15th October 2024

Committee Secretary
Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear at the Committee hearing on the 1st October 2024. We received the following questions on notice from Mr Wallace for reply.

1. Do you think that Social Media Companies owe their users, participants, partners, and content creators a duty of care?

We support the joint call by leading experts to compel social media platforms to step up and design their products for safety, not engagement, with greater transparency and user control, for example:

- a. putting an end to 'sticky features' like infinite scroll
- b. mandating safety features and increased social media literacy programs for young people
- c. increasing algorithm transparency and giving users control of their algorithms, so they are in charge of the content they see.

For a lot of young people, social media is their classroom, their workplace, their playground. They deserve, and want, increased protection and support on social media platforms. A duty of care incentivises social media companies to take on this responsibility, to listen to young people and prioritise their safety needs.

As experts in mental health education and promotion, batyr would like to further emphasise the importance of preventative approaches to safety online, approaches that do not wait for further harm to occur before taking action. Young people have highlighted the need for better online safety education that is responsive to their needs (Marsden et al., 2022). They have also spoken to the role that content creators have in sharing information (or misinformation) about mental health, as well as a desire to see more safe spaces to share lived experience (ReachOut, 2024). These may fall outside of any potential duty of care requirements, however are critical pieces of the journey towards safe social media.

2. How should the government work with social media companies to integrate mental health support services within platforms

batyr acknowledges and supports the importance of mental health services being embedded into platforms and would like to see continued advocacy from the government to further strengthen this integration. Young people are overwhelmingly using social media as a means of mental health support and information (ReachOut, 2024). Accessing services is just one part of this, with young people most commonly searching for practical advice, information about specific mental health conditions and hopeful information that helps them feel better. Importantly, they highlighted a preference for lived

experience stories as one of the key reasons they enjoy using social media to search for mental health information.

batyr leveraged these positive elements of social media and innovated safe digital spaces when we built our mental health storytelling app OurHerd with support from the Australian Government. OurHerd was designed in ways that minimise risk and maximise impact through design features such as a quickly accessible 'Lifering' button to support help-seeking, and moderated lived experience stories that avoid unsafe content and emphasise hope.

Mental health services being accessible online is only one part of a young person's journey to seeking help for their mental health. Mental health stigma and lack of knowledge about mental health services are some of the common barriers to help seeking we hear from young people. batyr is working to address these through our peer-led programs that prioritise stigma reduction and lived experience storytelling. We see everyday the positive role that this content plays in supporting young people to access help when they need it. As such, we believe stigma reduction efforts should also be implemented into social media platforms alongside mental health support services as a critical component of making these spaces safer.

3. Youth advisory bodies in Government often engage those who are already engaged, or who have an interest in a particular issue. These young people don't always reflect a true cross-section of the community. **How does Batyr believe that young people should be involved in shaping government policies around social media use and mental health in a way which is truly representative?**

batyr believes strongly in the role that young people should play in the conversation around social media. Research has shown that online safety in particular is largely an adult dominated conversation (Marsden et al. 2022). Young people are deeply invested in the area of social media, they are the experts and their voice should be heard.

Current methods of government consultation are challenging for young people to access. Processes such as submission writing or public hearings require specific knowledge and resourcing, and platforms such as advisory bodies, as noted, at times fail to reflect the diversity of young communities.

batyr have heard strongly from young people of the importance of providing multiple different avenues for consultation with them, including a mix of informal and formal. The Office for Youth's *Engage!* report (2024) highlighted a range of options including surveys, events and social media as desired options for engagement. It also highlighted the important role youth organisations can play in this space. Organisations such as batyr have built networks and trust with young people, and should be valued as an important part of the conversation.

Young people's voice can further be platformed in this process by prioritising research completed on young people's perspectives or in collaboration with young people directly, for example ReachOut's recent report '*Social media and mental health: what young people want*' (2024) and Prevention United's policy brief '*The impact of screen time and social media on the mental health of young Australians*' which was written in collaboration with young people (Maidment et al., 2024).

4. How would Batyr define the success of government interventions aimed at reducing the negative impact of social media on youth mental health? Specifically, what metrics should be used to evaluate these interventions over time?

Evaluation is an integral part of any reform process, however is particularly pertinent in this conversation around social media. Metrics to evaluate success in relation to youth mental health could include tracking general mental health outcomes such as decreased anxiety, decreased body image issues, decreased suicidal distress and decreased loneliness. It will also be important to understand any interventions impact on other areas such as bullying and child safety given their correlational relationship with young people's mental health. These metrics could be incorporated into existing national studies such as the Australian Child and Adolescent Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

The success of government interventions could also be evaluated through a cohort study directly investigating young people's experience of and relationship with social media. This would allow the government to ask broader questions such as how young people feel about social media, and also evaluate the impact of specific safety features such as investigating how much control young people have over algorithms. While metrics offer an efficient way to evaluate impact, it is paramount that the Government hears directly from young people as part of an ongoing conversation throughout this reform process.

Given the important role that social media plays in mental health awareness and help-seeking amongst young people, it would be also useful to monitor how these factors are impacted by any interventions.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide further clarification and insight into this important conversation.

Yours sincerely,

batyr

Citations

Maidment, K. Tonna, Z., Houlihan, M. & Carbone, S. (2024). *The impact of screentime and social media on the mental health of young Australians*. Prevention United.

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Marsden, L., Moody, L., Nguyen, B., Tatam, L., Welland, L., & Third, A. (2022). *Reimagining Online Safety Education through the Eyes of Young People: Co-Design Workshops with Young People to Inform Digital Learning Experiences*. Western Sydney University. <https://doi.org/10.26183/3bz3-r451>

Office for Youth (2024) *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make*.

Department of Education. Available at:

<https://www.youth.gov.au/engage/resources/engage-our-new-strategy-include-young-people-decisions-we-make> (Accessed: 10 October 2024).

ReachOut Australia (2024). *Harnessing the feed: Social media for mental health information and support*, Sydney: ReachOut Australia, 2024.