

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

Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

22 November 2024

Re: INQUIRY INTO THE ONLINE SAFETY AMENDMENT (SOCIAL MEDIA MINIMUM AGE) BILL 2024 [PROVISIONS]

AYAC is Australia's national peak body representing the interests of young people aged 12-25 years, and the wider youth sector. Serving in a leadership and advocacy capacity, AYAC provides advice to decision-makers on issues that impact young people and the sector. AYAC is unwavering in its commitment to a nation where young people are respected and have the power to lead change for a better world.

We welcome the opportunity to provide this contribution to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications Inquiry into the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 [Provisions].

However, we are compelled to note our **serious concerns about the timeline allowed for this Inquiry**. The incredibly short timeframe does not inspire confidence that this is a genuine consultation. Further, it effectively excludes young people – the very people who will be most impacted by this policy – from the process. This is a violation of young people's right to have a say in matters affecting them as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory. It also significantly undermines the great work that the Australian Government is otherwise doing in relation to amplifying youth voice – through the Youth Steering Committee and Youth Advisory Groups, and through the actions outlined in the *Engage!* strategy.

Everyone – government, experts, civil society organisations, parents, and young people themselves – is on the same page about something needing to be done to better protect young people online. However, this is not the right way to do it. We understand that one of the appeals of taking the route of a social media ban is that it is easier to regulate young people's behaviour than it is to regulate that of tech companies – after all, young people don't get to vote, while tech companies can threaten to 'take their business elsewhere' if governments don't play nice. However, this is placing the wrong party's needs at the forefront of policy-making in Australia.

[Indeed, children and young people themselves believe that online safety is a shared responsibility](#), and want parents, governments, schools, civil society organisations, and tech companies to work **with** them to make being online safer. The proposed social media ban ignores this very reasonable request, placing sole responsibility squarely on the shoulders of young people and effectively absolving the rest of us – tech companies in particular – of our responsibility to take action.

A number of criticisms have already been noted with regard to the impacts of the proposed social media ban, including:

- [infringement upon children's and young people's rights](#) to freedom of expression, access to information, and to participate in cultural and artistic life;
- impeding the ability to support and scaffold young people's use of social media and other online spaces, thereby running the risk of creating a generation of young people who are both [unprepared for managing online risks](#), and who are [trailing behind their global peers in development of digital literacy](#); and
- risks to the health, safety, and wellbeing of young people who will no longer be able to access important information and support online – [particularly young people from the LGBTQIA+ community](#), and from regional and rural communities.

Questions have also been raised about whether the proposed measure will even be effective, but will, rather, [drive young people's use of social media underground](#); and there are significant concerns regarding the [risks to young people's privacy and data security of age verification measures](#). It therefore appears very likely that the proposed social media ban will have the effect of exacerbating the very issue the government is attempting to solve.

Crucially, the proposed legislation would also prevent civil society organisations from being able to carry out our vital work in [supporting a thriving democracy](#). Social media is a key avenue through which youth-focused organisations – including state, territory, and national youth peaks – communicate with and engage young people. This is how we let young people know about things like leadership programs and consultation opportunities, and how we initiate conversations about the impact of public policy on young people. Social media is an important tool that we use to support young people's informal civic education. **A social media ban for children and young people under the age of 16 would therefore remove a necessary pathway for communication between the Australian Government and its young constituents.**

For all of the above reasons, we urge the Australian Government to hit pause on this bill.

Research shows [that children and young people actively take a range of steps to mitigate the risks of being online](#). Let's follow their lead, and develop a considered, measured, nuanced approach to dealing with this issue.

In fact, there is a ripe opportunity here – whereby the Australian Government could leverage the fantastic work being done in this space by the Young & Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University, along with the youth engagement mechanisms (including the Youth Steering Committee and Youth Advisory Groups) put in place by the current government, to create a truly world-leading example of effective policy that is co-designed with young people.

In the words of one of AYAC's young members:

Social media itself is neither inherently good nor bad; it is a tool that can serve different purposes based on how it is regulated, managed, and used. I am opposing a blanket ban on social media as it remains a valuable tool for learning, connection, and self-expression, especially for young regional Australians. However, I urge the government to consider policies that would ensure its responsible use among young Australians.

We urge the Australian Government to demonstrate that it is as capable of nuanced analysis of this issue as are young people, and reconsider its approach to the issue of online safety.

AYAC would be pleased to respond to queries relating to the issues discussed in this submission, and to work with the Australian Government to support young people's participation in the development of a co-designed online safety policy.

Contact

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