Beyond the debate: toward pragmatic evaluation of Australia's social media age restrictions

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Summary

Australia's social media age restriction policy for those aged under 16 years presents substantial evaluation challenges regarding effectiveness. This viewpoint extends the critical discourse on whether the age restrictions are appropriate and/or feasible and examines practical approaches to assess consequences of the policy. Comprehensive evaluation should examine second- and third-order effects, such as changes in young people's academic performance, digital literacy, mental and physical health indicators, and participation in alternative activities. Recognizing the challenges arising from similar policies in Asian regions, this viewpoint argues that age restrictions alone may achieve limited success without accompanying platform regulations based on safety-by-design principles. Social media restrictions may be less effective without regulations to enforce algorithmic transparency, duty of care obligations, and restrictions on user profiling. Rather than viewing this policy as an endpoint, Australia should establish rigorous long-term evaluation frameworks and consider regulatory approaches that address the structural incentives underlying harmful platform design.

Keywords: Social media; Age restrictions; Australia; Evaluation; Policy; Mental health; Youth; Adolescent; Wellbeing; Safety by design

Introduction

In December 2025, Australia implemented a world-first social media age-restriction policy aimed at preventing individuals under 16 years from holding accounts on major social media platforms, including *Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X,* and *YouTube.*[1] Platforms are now legally required to adopt age-verification systems, with fines of up to AUD$49.5 million for systemic non-compliance.[2] The public and academic discourse has seemingly coalesced into two opposing positions regarding merits of the policy. Proponents cite the need to address epidemiological trends in youth mental health.[3] Opponents and skeptics raise doubts arising from enforcement challenges, privacy concerns, and technological restrictions implemented in other regions which have failed to work as intended.[4,5] While commentary on the merits of the ban is important and necessary, a more pragmatic concern has received less attention: How should we evaluate the effects of the policy, including its costs and benefits? Given the ban is now in effect, it becomes timely to establish rigorous, independent scientific evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the ban against its intended objectives. While close collaboration between government and researchers prior to implementation would have enabled better evaluation design and baseline measurement, researchers must now find ways to assess effectiveness using existing longitudinal studies and cross-national comparisons.

Recent discussions about the ban have invoked varying ideological assumptions and ideas regarding digital technology, parental responsibility, and state oversight. Many of these discussions have raised issues that complicate counterproposals to the age restrictions.[6,7] For example, the notion that parents should be primarily responsible for restricting adolescent behavior assumes a level of parental capacity, knowledge, and willingness that many lack.[8] Similarly, while digital and media literacy interventions are promoted as primary prevention strategies, systematic reviews indicate only modest and inconsistent efficacy at population scale.[9,10] The argument that teaching critical thinking

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skills will resist advanced persuasion systems designed by a multi-billion-dollar industry remains empirically unsubstantiated.[11,12]

This viewpoint outlines critical issues and practical areas for policy evaluation that may assist in assessing the genuine effectiveness of the restrictions. Importantly, this viewpoint focused on scientific evaluation, which requires independent research infrastructure and carefully considered methodological approaches rather than monitoring and compliance checking (which is the role of the eSafety Commissioner). Drawing on regulatory precedents from other industries that have been aimed at protecting young people from harm, this paper argues that comprehensive evaluation must not only measure policy outcomes but also monitor industry adaptation strategies that may undermine policy effectiveness over time.

The policy context

The rationale for restricting social media access for young people is based on converging lines of epidemiological evidence which point to a deterioration in the mental health of Australian adolescents[13,14]—a trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.[15] Rates of depression and anxiety have risen significantly,[16] particularly among adolescent females.[13,14] Concurrently, social media has become more ubiquitous among younger Australians,[17] while the presence of potentially harmful content, including depictions of self-injurious behavior and suicide-related material, is increasingly common.[18] *The Lancet Psychiatry* Commission on youth mental health recently identified social media as a contributor to adolescent mental ill health.[19] These observations have intensified public health concerns about protecting underage users from harmful content. In justifying the restrictions, Anthony Albanese, the Prime Minister of Australia, stated that "*social media is doing social harm to our children*," and Anika Wells, the Communications Minister, stated that "*there's a place for social media, but there's not a place for predatory algorithms targeting children.*"[20]

While causal evidence linking social media use to adolescent harm is still mixed and inconclusive, several plausible mechanisms exist. Such mechanisms include algorithms which amplify negative social comparison, sleep disruption from constantly updating feeds and 'infinite scroll', and exposure to content designed to maximize user engagement rather than wellbeing.[21,22] Moreover, neurobiological models propose that, like other behavioral addictions, excessive social media use involves dysregulation of striatal reward circuits characterized by a shift from goal-directed to habitual processing,[23] potentially leading to a reinforcing cycle where social media is used to regulate the negative affect it generates.[24]

There is also growing recognition that the nature of social media has changed as the information ecosystem has transformed. Specifically, social media is now dominated by the integration of large language models, algorithmically curated content, and AI-generated material. *Dead internet theory*, for example draws attention to how the proportion of online content representing authentic human expression has been increasingly replaced by AI-driven content and content designed to be widely shared (i.e., to *go viral*).[25] For adolescents navigating an increasingly unreliable information landscape, this presents challenges beyond those addressable through conventional media literacy interventions.

Despite the concerns raised above, several practical and ethical challenges have been outlined in opposition to the ban. Regulatory precedents (e.g., from China and South Korea) demonstrate that age-based prohibitions can be readily circumvented through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and other technical means.[26,27] Historical precedents from the gambling, alcohol, tobacco industries have shown that these industries are also likely to increase pressure on legislators through lobbying and other tactics.[28] Ethically, legitimate concerns exist regarding data privacy and the surveillance infrastructure required for age-verification compliance.[4] Additionally, social media provides some benefits for marginalized and often socially isolated populations (e.g., particularly gender-, sexually-diverse and other socially-marginalized youth—who are more prone to mental health problems and less likely to seek help), offering access to affirming communities that may be unavailable offline.[29]

Overall, the policy must also be viewed within the broader context of children's rights in the digital environment. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights emphasizes the rights of children regarding information access and freedom of expression, alongside rights to protection from harm.[30] The Australian Human Rights Commission has highlighted the need to balance protective measures with children's developmental needs and participation rights, noting that age restrictions may inadvertently constrain young people's ability to engage with civic life, access health information, or participate in online learning communities.[31] Meanwhile, UNICEF has taken the position that age restrictions alone will not keep children safe online.[32] Therefore, any framework for evaluating effectiveness must also consider whether the policy disproportionately constrains these fundamental rights.

Historical precedents: examples from comparable industries

Although the Australian social media age restriction policy is unique, there are lessons or observations from

similar age-restriction policies that have been implemented in other regions, or within other industries which must also be considered. In 2019, China implemented its 'prevention of online gaming addiction' regulation, restricting access to online gaming platforms for those aged under 18 years to 1.5 h per day on weekdays and 3 h on public holidays. This was further tightened in 2021, limiting minors to just 3 h per week (1 h per day on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays only, between 8 pm and 9 pm). Similarly, throughout 2011–2021, South Korea implemented its 'Shutdown law' which prohibited those aged under 16 years from accessing online games between midnight and 6 am. A major observation from the China and South Korea policies is that neither achieved total compliance. Restrictions in China and South Korea were widely circumvented through VPNs, account sharing, and borrowed credentials. Both jurisdictions demonstrated mixed effects in reducing excessive engagement[33,34]; although heavier users in China showed lesser reductions in use,[35] suggesting the policy may not reach those most in need. Nonetheless, the lesson seems to be that even imperfect compliance may produce meaningful effects for average users, though as noted above, these must be weighed against substantial enforcement costs.

Beyond access restrictions, both China and South Korea also attempted to regulate platform design and content. China exercised direct government control of gaming companies by mandating content filtering and algorithmic auditing. South Korea required publishers to implement parental control systems and age-verification mechanisms. The purpose of these regulatory frameworks was aimed at addressing root causes (i.e., algorithm design and harmful content), rather than access alone. However, regulatory capture occurred in both contexts, and neither approach was uniformly successful.

Overall, the lessons from these policies should be that partial compliance is achievable, and that accompanying regulatory approaches to algorithm and content design are feasible. However, there were also barriers to implementation—neither jurisdiction achieved the political sustainability required for long-term enforcement. China's restrictions were progressively weakened by industry lobbying and concerns about economic impact. South Korea's shutdown law faced legal challenges and was ultimately repealed in 2021, partly due to enforcement difficulties and industry pressure. Other cited criticisms involved concerns about the surveillance infrastructure requirements and potential overreach,[36] echoing the privacy concerns now being raised regarding Australia.[4] In a more recent example from the UK—by *Ofcom* (Office of Communications, the online regulator) in the UK against *4Chan* (a US-based company)—operators located in foreign regions may also simply refuse to comply with national laws and continue to operate their services despite legal consequences. It seems likely that offshore migration by platforms will be inevitable, and opportunities may arise for new operators to outcompete compliant operators.

The critical lesson is that age restrictions alone are not sufficient (although this does not mean that they should not still be implemented). The Chinese and South Korean experiences suggest that effectiveness requires: (i) accompanying regulatory requirements on platform design and algorithmic transparency; (ii) international coordination to prevent regulatory arbitrage (i.e., platforms shifting to unregulated jurisdictions); (iii) investment in measurement infrastructure to track compliance and outcomes; and (iv) sustained political commitment to resist industry pressure and to protect the rights of adult users who may be negative affected. In line with this view, Germany's National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina recommended comprehensive approaches addressing platform design, educational support, and government regulation rather than age restrictions alone.[37] The Norwegian Government's Screen Use Committee likewise recommended multifaceted approaches including parental guidance, digital literacy, screen-free zones, and platform design modifications rather than age restrictions alone.[38] Meanwhile, Australia's approach has specified age restriction but has not yet articulated accompanying regulatory requirements or an international coordination strategy.

It is also essential that any evaluation framework is entirely independent from the social media industry and their commercial interests. There is a long history of policies designed to protect young people from harmful products (i.e., gambling, alcohol, tobacco), and an equally long history of determination by relevant industries to circumvent such legislation through evasion tactics and lobbying.[28] For example, the gambling, alcohol and tobacco industries have repeatedly adapted to age restrictions through targeted marketing, attractive packaging (e.g., ready-to-drink containers, flavored nicotine products) and sponsorship deals. Both alcohol and gambling industries have also attempted to leverage social media and influencer marketing to reach youth audiences in ways that traditional advertising restrictions did not anticipate.[39,40] Evidence suggests that these industries are adept at identifying, weakening, and circumventing regulatory obstacles (e.g., by lobbying, cherry-picking favorable evidence, and promoting self-regulation instead of government-imposed restrictions)[41,42]; all of which leads to progressive undermining of the policy. Therefore, it is essential that any scientific evaluation should be completely independent from the commercial interests of the concerned industries. While in some cases industry sponsorship and collaboration may be helpful for researchers (e.g., gaining access to consumer data to

advance public health), acceptance of funding from these industries carries significant risks to transparency which should be carefully considered.[43]

Areas of interest in evaluating policy effectiveness

In light of the context and historical precedents discussed above, there remains a critical policy question of whether the social media age restrictions will achieve its stated objectives. A comprehensive evaluation framework should encompass psychological, physiological, and social outcomes, beginning with proximal measures that are more likely to show early effects. Proximal outcomes should include actual social media use patterns (frequency, duration, platforms accessed), circumvention behaviors (VPN use, account sharing), and immediate psychological states such as fear of missing out, social connectedness, and daily mood. These proximal measures are particularly valuable because they are more likely to show early, detectable effects directly attributable to the policy before downstream health effects emerge.

Given adolescent mental health is influenced by multiple factors (e.g., socioeconomic conditions, educational pressures, family dynamics), a major challenge remains in how best to isolate the effects of the policy and establish causality. Another fundamental challenge is establishing the counterfactual (i.e., what would have happened without the restrictions). To address these challenges, researchers should employ naturalistic experiments utilizing existing longitudinal cohort studies within secondary education settings, which have already gathered baseline data on mental health, social media engagement, peer relationships, mobile phone use, gaming behavior, and related psychosocial variables. Crucially, incorporating contemporaneous mental health data from comparable jurisdictions without similar interventions (e.g., New Zealand, Canada, United Kingdom, United States—countries with similar digital infrastructure, youth social media usage, and comparable levels of mental health reporting) provides comparison groups needed to approximate the counterfactual and isolate policy from broader trends. Where possible, these should establish directly comparable cohorts using identical measures to maximize validity of cross-national comparison.

Stratification by demographics (age, gender, socioeconomic status, geographic location) may identify differential effects, whilst standardized measurement of discrete mental health domains (depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress, deliberate self-harm, suicidality) will capture heterogeneous effects. Critically, designs must assess actual compliance behaviors to compare experiences and outcomes across users, non-users, and circumventers. The restrictions also create opportunities to test mechanisms linking social media to outcomes. Rather than treating social media as monolithic, studies should examine which specific features (algorithmic feeds, late-night use, appearance-focused content) are most harmful.

Beyond mental health, evaluation should examine other psychological and health outcomes associated with reduced screen time. Social media use is associated with sleep fragmentation and circadian disruption.[22,44] Therefore, measurable improvements (or lack thereof) should be quantifiable through self-reported and objective sleep metrics. These indicators should also be independently validated among a subsample of youth using objective measures (e.g., polysomnographic assessment). As a second- and third-order effect, for example, potential sleep improvements should lead to better cognitive performance, including improved classroom attention (e.g., teacher-reported), reduced attention issues, and improved grade-based academic performance. Importantly, these indicators are also likely to reduce reporting bias and act as independent validity checks on subjective wellbeing measures.

Other areas of interest may include whether adolescents demonstrate improved ability to identify synthetic versus authentic content, reduced prevalence of misinformed beliefs, and more accurate perceptions of social reality post-intervention. Measuring these aspects is a major challenge, but one that is possible via validated assessment of: (i) awareness that encountered content may be AI-generated; (ii) ability to identify synthetic content; (iii) misinformation beliefs via surveys of familiarity with documented false claims; and (iv) social comparison anxiety and appearance-related distress (i.e., constructs associated with curated social media environments). A benefit of this approach is that it directly addresses the underlying information ecosystem problem, rather than just exposure and engagement metrics.

Recognizing that the age restriction policy is intended to promote greater involvement in non-digital media activities, longitudinal tracking should measure participation in structured activities, frequency of in-person social contact, patterns of alternative screen-based engagement (e.g., gaming, streaming, alternative platforms). Crucially, transparent evaluation must also assess potential adverse consequences. These include difficulties for and harms to vulnerable populations relying on social media for support (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth, those in remote areas), risks from circumvention behaviors (e.g., migration to less-regulated platforms, VPN security vulnerabilities), and any unintended effects of age verification (e.g., impact on privacy and digital rights, normalized surveillance). Given multiple potential outcomes and political pressures, preregistration of evaluation studies, and open-access data sharing should be the default.

Regulatory approaches to accompany the policy

Although the social media age restrictions aim to reduce access to harmful social media content; the policy does little to address the underlying structural incentives of the wider internet. Commercial platforms are optimized for engagement, rather than wellbeing. Without accompanying regulatory approaches, displaced users may simply migrate to less-regulated platforms with comparable design features. Therefore, several complementary regulatory strategies warrant consideration.

First, algorithm transparency and modification. Rather than relying solely on access restriction, jurisdictions could mandate algorithmic disclosure (at least to regulators, if not open-access), and prohibit engagement-maximizing algorithms as the default for accounts of younger users. Regulators should consider mandating chronological feeds which have natural endpoints when users have viewed available content, reducing the habitual checking behavior that algorithmic feeds engineer to maximize engagement during evening hours. Additional measures could include reduced recommendation intensity and caps on time-on-platform metrics, as have been implemented and enforced by regulators in online gambling to facilitate safer gambling practices.[45] However, while these approaches would be more difficult to circumvent than age verification alone, such measures would require support from platforms.

A second regulatory step might involve establishing a formal 'duty of care' framework that increases liability on social media companies for demonstrable harms associated with their platforms, for which platforms currently face minimal financial consequences. Implementing duty of care obligations (i.e., making platforms liable for demonstrable harms associated with their recommendation algorithms similar to product liability frameworks) would fundamentally change the risk calculus within these companies. This approach would have some similarities to emerging European regulation and Australian consumer law frameworks (e.g., by holding AI companies liable for manipulative and misleading behavior).[46,47]

Finally, regulators should consider limiting the extent to which platforms can profile young users and restricting personalization-based advertising—which effectively undermines the business model that makes engagement-maximization profitable. Collectively, these approaches represent a shift toward 'safety by design' principles—requiring platforms to build products that prioritize user wellbeing at the outset, rather than retrofitting protections after harms emerge. Safety by design frameworks, combined with duty of care obligations and incentive restructuring are more likely to address the root incentive structure linked to harms.

Implications for Australia: what's next?

Australia's implementation could benefit from examining comparable historical precedents and considering whether such a blanket measure is the best option, given opportunities for other strategies relating to regulatory requirements on algorithm design and whether content curation for operating in the Australian market would make a difference without censoring content. The social media age restriction policy provides an opportunity to establish that platforms must implement algorithmic transparency, permit chronological feed options, and demonstrate compliance with content moderation standards. All of these requirements would benefit all users, not just those targeted by the policy. Critically, international coordination is essential. Australia should consider working with other western democracies to establish coordinated regulatory standards.

Regulatory coordination creates mutual enforcement incentives (i.e., platforms cannot simply shift to unregulated jurisdictions if multiple significant markets have aligned requirements). This approach differs from the failed precedent of unilateral restrictions by creating genuine structural incentives for compliance. At the same time, carefully designed longitudinal evaluation must proceed in parallel. Rather than implementing the policy and hoping for improvement, Australia should fund cohort studies tracking mental health, engagement patterns, circumvention strategies, and outcomes across demographic subgroups. Independent research evidence will help to determine whether the policy represents genuine progress or merely displacement of harms, as well as the cost-effectiveness of the policy.

Conclusions

The social media age restriction policy is now legislated. Rather than continuing to argue over its merits, the critical task is to ensure thoughtful and rigorous evaluation of its effects according to its intended objectives and identify strategies to enhance future effectiveness. The experiences of other jurisdictions demonstrate that age restrictions alone are insufficient—effectiveness requires accompanying regulatory measures addressing algorithmic design, platform accountability, and international coordination. The social media age restriction creates an opportunity to establish broader standards for digital platforms that could benefit all users. Australian young people, particularly those already experiencing social marginalization, deserve policy interventions that are rigorously evaluated and iteratively improved based on empirical evidence. Whether this policy represents genuine progress or merely displaces harms will depend on thorough evaluation and a willingness to adapt policy as evidence emerges.

Contributors

MS: conceptualization, writing–original draft, writing–reviewing and editing. MR: writing–reviewing and editing. OK: writing–reviewing and editing. MDG: writing–reviewing and editing. PD: conceptualization, writing–reviewing and editing. ZD: conceptualization, writing–reviewing and editing. AC: conceptualization, writing–reviewing and editing. DLK: conceptualization, writing–original draft, writing–reviewing and editing. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to its publication.

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