

Disadvantages of Age Verification Policies for Under-16s on Social Media

The Australian government's proposed age verification policy for under-16s on social media seeks to protect children from harmful content and interactions online. While this goal is laudable, the policy has significant disadvantages, spanning privacy, technical feasibility, inclusivity, economic implications, and broader societal effects. This paper provides a comprehensive exploration of these issues.

Privacy and Data Security Concerns

Age verification systems often require sensitive data such as government-issued identification or biometric information. These methods raise substantial privacy risks by creating centralised databases of sensitive user information. A breach of such systems could have dire consequences, including identity theft and misuse of personal data. For instance, the 2020 hacking of Australia's health insurer Medibank exposed the private information of nearly 10 million Australians, underscoring the potential vulnerabilities of large data repositories (ABC News, 2020).

Additionally, minors' personal information is particularly sensitive, and storing such data in compliance with privacy laws like the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) would require costly and complex infrastructure. Even with compliance, no system is entirely secure from cyberattacks, making the risks disproportionately high relative to the intended benefits (Access Partnership, 2024).

Limited Efficacy and Potential for Evasion

Enforcing age restrictions reliably remains a challenge. Many young users are adept at bypassing verification processes by using fake IDs or alternative accounts. According to a 2023 report by the *eSafety Commissioner*, over 60% of underage social media users admitted to lying about their age to access restricted platforms (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). This trend suggests that age verification measures might not effectively deter determined minors from accessing social media, thereby undermining the policy's objectives.

Furthermore, reliance on AI-driven age estimation techniques introduces its own issues, as such systems are often prone to inaccuracies, particularly among diverse populations with varying facial features and skin tones. This technological limitation can lead to both false positives and negatives, excluding legitimate users while allowing others to bypass restrictions (Crikey, 2024).

Exclusion from Social Support Networks

Social media platforms are more than entertainment hubs; they serve as vital spaces for support, education, and advocacy. For many adolescents, particularly those in marginalised communities, these platforms provide access to mental health resources, peer support, and advocacy groups. Banning under-16s could inadvertently isolate them from these critical lifelines.

Research by *ReachOut Australia* found that 80% of young Australians use social media to connect with mental health support networks, and 65% say they feel more connected to their peers through these platforms (ReachOut Australia, 2022). Cutting off access could disproportionately harm those already vulnerable, such as LGBTQ+ youth or children in remote areas with limited offline support.

Broader Impact on Users and Society

Although the policy targets under-16s, its implementation necessitates age verification for all users to ensure compliance. This requirement introduces additional barriers for adults, raising concerns about surveillance and freedom of expression. Mandatory age checks could create a chilling effect, discouraging individuals from engaging online due to fears of their data being tracked or misused (Access Partnership, 2024).

Such measures also have potential ripple effects. For example, restricting minors from social media might drive them to unregulated platforms or the dark web, exposing them to even greater risks without the safeguards of mainstream platforms (Crikey, 2024).

Economic and Innovation Costs

Implementing age verification systems requires substantial investment from social media companies. These costs include the development of new technologies, legal compliance, and ongoing maintenance of secure databases. Smaller companies, in particular, may struggle to bear these financial burdens, leading to reduced competition and innovation in the tech sector.

Moreover, large platforms may divert resources from addressing harmful content or improving user experience to comply with the new regulations. A 2023 study by *Deloitte* highlighted that compliance with similar regulations in the EU cost small and medium enterprises an average of €200,000 annually, significantly impacting their profitability and growth potential (Deloitte, 2023).

Long-Term Implications for Digital Literacy and Rights

Restricting access to social media for minors could have unintended consequences for digital literacy. Adolescents denied early exposure to online platforms may lack essential digital skills as they grow older, leaving them ill-equipped for a world increasingly dependent on technology.

Furthermore, the policy raises ethical concerns about children's rights to participate in digital life. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) highlights the importance of balancing protection with participation, advocating for children's right to express themselves and access information (UNICEF, 2020). Age verification policies risk disproportionately prioritising protection over participation, limiting young people's ability to engage meaningfully in the digital age.

Conclusion

The proposed age verification policy for under-16s on social media in Australia presents significant disadvantages. It poses substantial risks to privacy and data security, is limited in efficacy, and could exclude young people from vital support networks. Additionally, the policy's broader implications for adult users, the economy, innovation, and digital literacy warrant serious reconsideration. Policymakers must explore alternative approaches, such as enhanced parental controls and digital literacy initiatives, to achieve the goal of online safety without the unintended negative consequences.

References

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