

Social media age restrictions: The case for an evaluation framework

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Introduction

The digital environment is now an integral aspect of the youth experience. Here, the benefits are many: connection and collaboration; entertainment and comfort; access to knowledge and resources; learning, creativity, and self-expression. It is through the digital world that many young people today learn about who they are and how to engage with the world around them.

The digital environment also presents complex risks to young people, particularly through the ways young people interact with a broad range of digital systems such as social media, online gaming, online gambling, and generative AI. Young people are engaging with a rapidly evolving digital landscape during a time that is critical to the development of their sense of self and who they are becoming, as well as the development of important cognitive capabilities and help-seeking behaviours.^{1,2} This may make them particularly sensitive to experiences that relate to their social identities and remarkably receptive to new forms of interaction and learning.³ Given this critical developmental period, there is growing concern about how the digital environment may be affecting young people's wellbeing and an urgent need to address young people's wellbeing and safety in the digital environment.

Among the emerging efforts to mitigate the risks of the digital environment to young people, age-based regulations have been gaining global momentum. In December 2025, Australia implemented a social media age restriction policy that prevents under-16-year-olds from creating or holding accounts on social media platforms that meet the criteria for age restriction such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok, X, and YouTube.^{4,5} These platforms are now legally required to demonstrate that reasonable measures – such as age assurance mechanisms – are actioned to ensure that under-16s are unable to have accounts.

Discourse on social media age restrictions has been divisive. Those in favour of the policy propose that this is a step towards addressing the global youth mental health decline.⁶⁻⁸ The argument here is that restricting under-16s' access to social media may reduce the risk of them encountering harmful content online and interacting with features of social media designed to maximise user engagement. On the other hand, the opposition raises important concerns about feasibility, privacy, and enforcement; how the policy may interfere with a young person's rights including the right to civic participation, access to information and online learning resources; how the policy may limit young people's ability to engage with the positive aspects of social media; and how, once the policy is in place, under-16s will be supported to navigate social media platforms for when they do inevitably gain access.⁹⁻¹²

Nevertheless, the momentum for social media age restrictions is increasing, with more countries – including Aotearoa New Zealand¹³ – shifting towards implementing similar policies. The question is no longer why the policy should or should not be introduced, but rather, what its intended outcomes are and how these outcomes will be achieved. A pragmatic approach is necessary to assess how the policy will protect young people from the risks and hazards of the digital environment and what additional actions may be needed to ensure that the policy can achieve meaningful outcomes.

Social media age restrictions are one of many potential ways to address the risks of the digital environment to young people, and it is already clear that the policy alone will not be sufficient to

protect young people from the existing and emerging risks of the digital environment.^{12,14,15} This paper discusses the importance of implementing an evaluation framework that assesses how a social media age restriction policy can effectively reach meaningful outcomes and how the policy may contribute to a broader ecosystem of youth digital safety approaches. Although the digital environment consists of a range of dynamic digital systems, this paper focuses only on the potential risks and hazards related to social media engagement.

Potential mechanisms of risks on social media to young people

What prompted social media age restrictions was the convergence of increasing mental health challenges in young people and young people's increasing engagement with the digital world – both of which were accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁶⁻¹⁹ There is a growing body of empirical literature that suggests that there is an association between young people's social media engagement and negative mental health outcomes, ranging from symptoms of anxiety and depression, body dissatisfaction, sleep disruption, and suicidal ideation.^{2,20-25} However a causal relationship has been debated. There is no causal evidence to suggest that all young people who engage with social media are at risk of experiencing mental health challenges. The associative evidence also suggests that those who have no association with digital media are also at risk, again this may reflect reverse causality. It is also important to recognise that each person experiences the digital environment differently and in a way that is intricately curated; such heterogeneity is difficult to quantify with existing methodologies.

That said, there are plausible mechanisms underlying social media use and youth wellbeing. For example, mental health challenges may emerge where individual and developmental vulnerabilities intersect with specific features found within social media platforms.^{23,26,27} To elaborate, social media platforms utilise increasingly sophisticated AI-powered algorithms to curate and capture the user experience. The content that a user encounters on social media is typically shaped by individual preferences, preferences of others belonging to similar demographic categories including age and gender, and preferences of others who have engaged with similar content previously. These predictive analytics are used to iteratively tailor content to the user in a way that promotes ongoing platform engagement. Thus, if the current algorithmic understanding of a 16-year-old's preferences includes content related to achieving an idealised physical appearance, then a 16-year-old's social media experience is more likely to consist of such content. This may then coincide with individual factors and inadvertently amplify the negative effects of appearance-focused social comparison, especially for someone who is still learning how to regulate emotions and developing a sense of who they are and what it means to be accepted by others.^{2,28}

Furthermore, engagement with features such as the infinite scroll may contribute to the development of a reinforcing and habit-forming cycle whereby a young person who views harmful content may continue to scroll through social media content to regulate the negative emotions that were previously induced.^{29,30}

It is also important to recognise how the nature of the information landscape is transforming with the integration of sophisticated AI technologies. Social media continues to be a popular

domain through which young people seek knowledge and access information, including health information, current events, and educational resources.^{2,31,32} However, the information landscape is becoming increasingly unreliable due to economic incentives favouring content that is widely distributed and seen by many. Social media platforms are now dominated by AI-driven and algorithmically curated content that prioritises user engagement and challenges information integrity.^{27,33} As AI continues to evolve, discerning content that is created by humans or generated by AI will become more difficult. Additionally, exposure to algorithmically curated content may shape user perceptions and behaviours.^{33,34} This presents challenges to people and society at large, and particularly to the younger generation who are forming identities and developing important cognitive capabilities.

Overall, digital harm to young people is likely to emerge where certain features within social media platforms intersect with individual and developmental vulnerabilities. Efforts to mitigate the risks of social media use on youth wellbeing should therefore consider how it will target the underlying mechanisms of digital harm.

A pragmatic approach to the social media age restriction policy

As New Zealand considers introducing its own social media age restriction policy, it needs to first address questions around policy effectiveness and additional actions necessary for the policy to achieve meaningful outcomes. Considering the potential mechanisms of digital harm, restricting under-16s' access to social media alone cannot sufficiently address the emerging risks of the digital environment to young people. Further actions to accompany the policy are necessary, but these should be founded in evidence and adaptive to the rapidly evolving digital landscape. This necessitates establishing a comprehensive and scientific infrastructure to support the ongoing, iterative, and independent evaluation of the policy – as well as accompanying strategies – and its effectiveness in addressing young people's digital safety.

Whether a policy is effective may depend on the extent to which the policy can achieve its intended aims and outcomes. Currently, it is unclear what specific outcomes New Zealand's social media age restriction policy seeks to achieve and how it will do this. To say that restricting access to social media platforms will either generally improve youth mental health or reduce young people's exposure to harmful social media content underestimates the complexities of youth mental health and wellbeing^{35,36} and lacks the specificity to guide additional approaches that can pragmatically and meaningfully enhance youth digital safety and youth wellbeing.

Implementing a comprehensive evaluation framework may help clarify policy outcomes and the mechanisms through which these outcomes may be achieved, assess whether these outcomes are indeed being achieved over time, and provide guidance on a pragmatic way forward. Such a framework would be critical in clarifying valuable parameters such as how outcomes will be measured, if there are any intermediary indicators of early effects, and what baseline data need to be established to assess policy effectiveness, in a way that is guided by empirical evidence and relevant expertise (including lived experience).

Putting this into context, one hypothetical outcome of the social media age restriction policy may be to promote the development of emotional regulation skills in under-16s. With reference to the mechanisms of digital harms previously discussed, the policy may propose to achieve this through the following – albeit very simplified – process: in restricting access to social media, under-16s are theoretically less likely to encounter content that induces negative affect, and less likely to engage with social media features that helps to alleviate the negative experience, which may in turn encourage habit formation.^{29,30} Having determined an outcome and potential pathways for facilitating change, it becomes clear that the following questions and baselines must be established: 1) what do processes of emotional regulation currently look like for under-16s; 2) what is the role of social media engagement in these processes; and 3) what alternative processes and supports should be promoted in the absence of social media?

Although this is a highly generalised and simplified example, and the processes of regulating emotions and social media engagement are more nuanced and complex than briefly described here, this demonstrates how an evaluation framework can support policymakers to consider the mechanisms by which a policy will achieve its objectives and what measures are needed for this to be assessed.

In addition, a robust evaluation framework should also encourage policymakers to consider the gaps created by restricting under-16s' access to social media. One example is how the policy may affect the benefits that social media currently provides to under-16s, and what alternatives should be provided to address the gaps that the policy may create. A major benefit of social media is connection and access to social support, resources, and opportunities that may not be available offline.³⁷⁻³⁹ Given the decline of informal and offline public gathering spaces, restricting social media access may be removing an important form of support to some young people; thus, there should be additional actions following the social media restriction policy to address these gaps, such as creating and actively promoting offline gathering spaces and opportunities for young people.

An evaluation framework is particularly essential for guiding additional actions to follow a social media age restriction policy, given that, once a young person reaches 16, they will inevitably engage with social media platforms and be exposed to the risks and challenges of social media and the digital world. The question of what strategies – regulatory or otherwise – need to be actioned to prepare under-16s, as well as the broader social ecosystem around them such as families and communities, for the potential risks of social media engagement when they turn 16, can be more comprehensively addressed from having clarified what mechanism of change the policy proposes to operate on and what gaps are therefore created.

Creating systems to support young people's digital safety

The social media age restriction policy alone cannot sufficiently address the potential risks of young people's social media engagement. Young people will inevitably engage with social media platforms, either once they turn 16 or through other means circumventing the restriction. There is also the concern of how the policy will adapt to the emerging challenges presented by rapidly advancing technological innovations, such as generative AI, which is already being woven into young people's daily lives beyond social media platforms. To address these concerns,

consideration should be given to how the policy sits within a broader ecosystem of approaches addressing youth digital safety, and how this policy may also strengthen other strategies that share similar aims.

For example, many have already recommended additional regulatory actions to address young people's digital safety, including regulation of algorithmic recommendation systems,¹³ and introduction of a 'duty of care' framework that holds social media companies accountable for design features associated with demonstrable harms.⁴⁰ These are important and necessary recommendations that recognise the role of platform owners in providing a service that is safe for its users. These regulatory actions, if implemented, will support the social media age restriction policy in reducing online harm to young people within the context of social media engagement. At the same time, the social media age restriction policy itself sets a precedent for the introduction of policies that acknowledge and enforce the responsibility of the platforms and other digital systems in prioritising user safety in their design.

Given the increasing breadth and dynamic nature of the digital environment, building a cohesive and collaborative system of approaches is necessary to ensure that multiple aspects and avenues of risks and challenges are appropriately addressed. Digital safety should be a collaborative effort that involves input from across multiple expertise and experiences, including young people, and the effectiveness of this system of approaches – both the individual components and the system broadly – should be rigorously assessed within an evaluation framework.

Conclusion

The convergence of rapid technological innovation and declining youth mental health and wellbeing has sparked discussions of regulatory actions that should be taken to address youth digital safety. Among these is the social media age restriction, which has gained traction across many countries including New Zealand.

As New Zealand considers implementing its own social media age restriction policy, establishing a robust scientific infrastructure and an evaluation framework is necessary to ensure that the policy can achieve meaningful outcomes. A social media age restriction policy can only address some of the challenges that may arise through social media and broader digital engagement. A rigorous and independent evaluation system can support policymakers to make evidence-based decisions on how the policy will address the potential mechanisms of digital harm, what measures will indicate meaningful change, who will be affected by the policy, and what adaptations may support the policy to remain relevant within an adaptive network of approaches to address youth digital safety within the broader digital environment.

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