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AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
Centre of **Digital**
Excellence
for the **Child.**

28th of June 2024

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

Submission to Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

This submission is prepared by Dr Karley Beckman and Dr Tiffani Apps, Digital Technologies for Learning, School of Education, University of Wollongong.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society. We write this submission in our capacity as academics and researchers in Digital Technologies for Learning, School of Education, University of Wollongong, and Associate Investigators within the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. Our collective research focuses on issues of datafication of children and children's rights in digital environments.

We welcome the Australian government's legislative focus on protecting children from social media.

We provide a submission in response to specific areas of the Terms of Reference and recommend that the following policy-related initiatives be implemented.

(a) the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media

Age verification measures designed to protect Australian children from social media may be limited in practical impacts due to:

1. Age limits and verification are limited as protective measures as they do not support children to participate safely with social media. While the government must take measures to prevent risk and protect children from harms, such measures must also consider the best interests of the child, their evolving capacities and voices. We recommend age limits and verification measures be implemented in Australia as one component of a comprehensive strategy to protect children **and** support their positive participation in digital environments. This strategy should be underpinned by the principles from the UNCRC general comment 25[1] and include a systematic focus on:

    *   enforcing data minimisation requirements for social media platforms who provide services to Australian children

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[1] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [UN CRC]. (2021). *General comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment.* https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsqIkirKQZLK2M58RF%2f5F0vEG%2bcAAx34gC78F wvnmZXGFUl9nJBDpKR1dfKekJxW2w9nNryRsgArkTJgKelqeZwK9WXzMkZRZd37nLN1bFc2t

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- updated K-12 curriculum that focuses on the development of *critical* digital literacy including (social) media literacy for understanding the nature and logic of platforms, impacts of datafication and children's digital rights.

2. Young children's engagement with and datafication by social media is largely facilitated by others. Research of Australian children shows that approximately 1 in 4 children between the ages of 8-12 use social media platforms including Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram[2]. These findings suggest that parents and caregivers likely facilitate children's access and/or use of social media.

As part of our work in the ARC Centre of Excellence of the Digital Child, we are leading a national research project exploring the use of social media by primary schools across Australia. The findings of this ongoing project evidence the subtle ways that parents and schools facilitate children's engagement with social media platforms. The uses of social media by parents, teachers and schools implicate children, often as the subjects, in the posts, images, videos shared on these platforms. By implication children in this practice parents and schools socialise children in the use of social media. We recommend that more attention be paid to the subtle ways that children are engaged with and introduced to social media. Specific strategies include:

- A review of relevant policy and increased accountability for school departments and schools in the ways they use social media that involves children and their data. This would complement the recommendations about data minimisation outlined in item 1 (above).

- Proactive and educative strategies to support schools, teachers and parents to better understand the risks and harms associated with children's engagement with social media and equip them with informed strategies to promote healthy and safe uses of social media.

(f) any related matters.

We recommend the Government implement updates to the APP, as set out in the Government response to the Privacy Act Review[3]. Particularly the Government's agreement that a Children's Online Privacy code should be developed (proposal 16.5) as soon as legislated protections for children are enacted to enable the development of such an APP code. A Children's Online Privacy code will be critical in ensuring children are protected *and* can participate safely in digital environments.

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[2] Office of the eSafety Commissioner (2018). State of play: Youth, kids and digital dangers. https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/youth-digital-dangers
[3] Australian Government. (28th September 2023). Government response to the Privacy Act Review Report, https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/government-response-privacy-act-review-report.PDF