

Submission to the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

Re: Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024

21 November 2024

On behalf of Pride in Swan Inc., we write to express our support for enhanced online safety measures for young people. However, we firmly believe that the proposed blanket ban on social media access for individuals under 16 is neither the most effective nor equitable solution.

For many vulnerable youth, particularly those from the LGBTIQ+SB community, social media is far more than a digital pastime, it is a critical lifeline. It is often the only way they can connect with others who share their experiences, access affirming spaces, and find support networks that validate their identities. These connections are essential to their mental health and emotional well-being, especially in rural or remote areas where physical support systems may be unavailable.

We advocate for a balanced approach that prioritises safety, accountability, inclusion, and education, without isolating young people who rely on these platforms for connection and support.

Key Concerns and Recommendations:

1. Accountability for Social Media Providers

Social media platforms must take greater responsibility for the safety of their users, particularly young people. This includes:

- Enforcing stronger anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies.
- Proactively moderating harmful content such as hate speech and misinformation.
- Addressing systemic abuse and ensuring those who post harmful content face consequences.

Platforms must be held accountable through significant penalties for non-compliance with safety standards.

2. Safe and Inclusive Online Spaces

Instead of banning access, efforts should focus on creating safe and inclusive platforms that promote positive interactions. Social media can be a critical tool for connection, education, and support, especially for marginalised groups like LGBTIQ+SB youth. These online spaces are often their only access to understanding peers, mental health support, and identity-affirming communities.

3. Education for Families and Communities

Parents, guardians, and educators play an essential role in the digital safety of young people. Government investment in educational initiatives should include:

- Training on how to use privacy settings effectively.

- Strategies for recognising and addressing online risks.
- Promoting open conversations between children and their caregivers about online experiences.

4. Balancing Access with Protection

Social media is a vital part of social and emotional development for young people, particularly those who may feel isolated or marginalised due to geography, identity, or other factors. Rather than banning access outright, we propose:

- Implementing age-appropriate safeguards and content moderation.
- Encouraging the development of platforms with built-in protections for younger users.
- Strengthening laws that regulate hate speech and misinformation to make social media safer for everyone.

At Pride in Swan, we have witnessed firsthand the positive impact of online platforms on young people, particularly those in the LGBTIQ+SB community. For many, social media is not just a tool for communication but a lifeline to acceptance, understanding, and support.

While we understand the intent behind the proposed changes, we believe a targeted approach that balances access with protection will better serve the well-being of young Australians. A solution that includes holding platforms accountable, fostering education, and ensuring inclusivity will create safer and more empowering online experiences without cutting off vital connections for those who need them most.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Yours sincerely,

Jeannie Williams

Chairperson, Pride in Swan Inc.