Response: Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2024 [Provisions]

Response

Bloom-ED has some serious concerns regarding the Online Safety Amendment minimum age social media ban. Social media remains an important source of information about sex, consent and healthy relationships for teens. Social media provides a source of information about sex, consent, and healthy relationships that can feel safer and more comfortable for adolescents than family or school sources. Furthermore, due to an ongoing lack of sexuality education for parents and training for teachers, social media information is vital as it fills gaps of information that are outside the bounds of what parents and schools are able to offer.

Age verification and social media bans potentially conflict with previous significant government financial commitments. The Australian Government have previously (and quite recently) realised the value in using social media as a powerful educational tool for teens. In 2023, the value of educating young people about sex and relationships via social media was recognised, and, as such, "$3.5 million under the National Plan was given to support Teach Us Consent to curate, develop and distribute social media resources" [1]. While funding commitments were stipulated as aimed towards 16+, Teach us Consent's user base includes users much younger than this. Likewise, "the 2022-23 Budget included $100.4 million over 5 years to continue supporting Our Watch which includes: *"Our Watch is funded to deliver The Line - a primary prevention social marketing campaign, designed to encourage adolescents and young adults **aged 14 plus** years to engage with age appropriate and evidence based information that educates on: consent; dating; respectful relationships; masculinity; sex; emotions; and pornography."* [1]. These initiatives will be set up to fail if young people are unable to access such content and conflicts with previous government commitments that the adolescents were promised.

Learning via digital means is a valuable resource for young people's development and conceptualisation. Social media and associated platforms can offer information of relevance to teens that may not be addressed in other spaces. Banning young people from social media or algorithmically blocking young people from content can have a significant impact on mental health, as well as individual and sexual wellbeing. Social media applications and websites can be useful sources of support, comradery and connection building for all youth, however, this is particularly important for youth with disability who experience systemic barriers that limit physical connection(s). For users who struggle with difficulties such as mental health, gender, sexual identity or even homework, there are Reddit, X (Twitter) and Facebook-based community groups affording them access to a sense of community and connection, serving the additional purpose of a digital support network and providing youth with a sense of belonging and safety.

For many of these challenges, the best protection is an evidence-based countering to the questionable content and support to move away from the topic of dangerous fascination. Not only is banning some of these sites unlikely to be effective, but it makes it more difficult for young people to ask for help.

The need for education

Educational measures that address content that young people may see in a timely, comprehensive and open manner is a more suitable and effective strategy than prohibition [2]. Particularly given that young people have often demonstrated that they are competent enough to overcome any proposed blocking measures. Information to prepare young people should include discussions around sexual content. Education should include media literacy, critical literacy understanding, and additionally, pornography literacy that allows young people to deconstruct and critique negative messaging [3,4].

Additionally, since social media serves as a vital source of information about sexual activities and bodies not currently covered within schools, if a ban is to proceed, additional policy and curriculum changes would be needed to supplement this information currently covered by social media. Additional teacher training and professional learning would be required in all pre-service educator degrees. Information would also need to include sexual pleasure, the specifics of sex, gender identity, female anatomy, communication, and love.

Teachers require support to navigate sensitive topics such as sex and pornography that respond to the needs of teens. Likewise, there needs to be additional financial support for schools to engage experts and external stakeholders to offer information to students, with an auditing process in place to ensure efficiency. Research indicates [5], that Australian parents want schools to tackle sex and relationships in more detail and from an early age. Such information will assist young people to feel prepared for relationships, their sexual lives, and what they may see online.

Children's Rights

When working to safeguard children from harm in the digital environment, it remains important to guard against impacting their rights as digital citizens and their entitlement to access knowledge and be heard [6]. Access to age-appropriate, evidence-based information around sexuality is a human right, even for children. (United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child Article 17). Social media importantly fills this role for many young people who claim social media offers them more valuable and detailed information than other formal sources in their lives. Given research suggests that social media platforms are a growing source of important sex and sexual health knowledge, as well as a support for teens and young people [7], we strongly oppose this ban.

If the ban does proceed, the Australian Government needs to look towards filling this important gaps of information currently filled by sexuality educators, health organisations and sexologists online by adding additional sexuality topics to the curriculum and funding external organisations and institutions to provide more detailed resources about sex and sexuality that teens are able to access in formal and informal settings. Appropriate educational content that addresses important sexual information gaps helps destigmatise sex, encourage open discussion, and may enable new knowledge which can ultimately lead to a reduction in sexual violence [9]. Given Australia is amid a gender-based violence crisis, detailed information about sex and sexuality is vital.

Bloom-ED also acknowledges that a social media ban will not achieve the risk of cyberbullying, harmful content, or online predators who will still access the teens through other means, such as online games. Furthermore, the

implementation of a social media ban places the 'blame' on the victim and punishes them, without providing any true consequences to the perpetrators of online harm. The majority of young people do not support such an endeavour. Bloom-ED implores the government to listen to youth and their needs in this space as they deserve the autonomy and right to help design solution(s) that reduce the incidences of harm in a manner that ensures education and autonomy are supported and encouraged.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require any further information.

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