# Australia’s under-16 social media ban sparks debate over flawed age verification and children’s privacy



Australia's impending legislation to ban social media access for users under 16 years old heralds a pivotal shift in the regulation of online platforms. Following its announcement in November 2024, the law is set to take effect in December 2025 and has garnered significant attention, not only within Australia but globally, as other nations including the UK, Ireland, Singapore, and Japan consider similar measures. This unprecedented approach reflects deepening concerns about the impact of social media on young people's mental health, with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese advocating for stronger protections amid rising public support for the initiative.

The new law prohibits social media companies from using official identification methods, such as passports, for age verification, and further restricts them from tracking Australian users. However, it fails to define alternative protocols for age verification, prompting the federal government to initiate a trial of various age verification technologies. Spearheaded by the Age Check Certification Scheme, a UK-based organisation, this trial aims to evaluate methods capable of ensuring users' ages effectively and is expected to conclude by the end of June.

Criticism, however, has already emerged regarding the trial's scope and the technological innovations being assessed. Sources highlight the issue of "age assurance" versus "age verification," the latter being a stricter and more reliable method of validating a user’s age through credible documentation. The current methodologies under review include facial recognition systems—seen by some experts as flawed, particularly for children whose facial features are still developing—and less reliable techniques such as metadata analysis and behavioural estimation.

Moreover, observations from child advocacy organisations, such as Digital Rights Watch, underscore the challenges inherent to these technologies. It has been pointed out that minors can easily bypass age restrictions through the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) and various tactics such as logging into accounts of older individuals. The debate surrounding the efficacy and practicality of age verification highlights a broader ethical concern regarding children's privacy rights, as effective implementation should not come at the cost of compromising their personal data.

Doubts permeate the effectiveness of the technologies being trialled, with reports indicating resistance from major tech companies. Apple and Google, for example, have shown minimal engagement in the trial's processes, opting to promote their solutions. Apple's age verification proposal allows for parental oversight, thereby shifting some responsibility onto parents and raising concerns about adult compliance in managing minors' online interactions. In contrast, Google’s proposal requires users over 16 to share sensitive government-issued IDs, raising further privacy concerns while lacking infrastructure to fully unite social media platforms under a cohesive verification system.

The implications of this legislative move extend beyond safeguarding minors; they pose significant questions about the future landscape of digital communication. Critics argue that rather than protect children, the ban might inadvertently isolate vulnerable youth from essential support networks and self-expression avenues available online. As Lizzie O'Shea, co-founder of Digital Rights Watch, noted, the measures might do little to address the underlying issues associated with unhealthy online behaviours, leaving many unanswered questions about the responsibility of tech platforms, parents, and policymakers.

Overall, as Australia readies itself to enforce this unprecedented legislation, it is imperative to consider the broader implications on children’s rights, digital interactions, and the responsibilities of technology companies. This legislative path may set a global precedent for how youth engagement in digital spaces is regulated, but it also raises concerns about the balance between protection and the rights of children to access necessary information in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. As the trial progresses, its outcomes will likely shape not only Australia's approach to online safety but also influence international discourse on youth engagement with technology.

**Reference Map**

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. Paragraphs 1, 2, 4
3. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 5
4. Paragraphs 4, 5
5. Paragraphs 1, 2, 4, 5
6. Paragraphs 3, 5, 6
7. Paragraphs 1, 2, 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.themandarin.com.au/292366-tech-used-to-trial-ways-to-enforce-australias-under-16s-social-media-ban-is-flawed/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/australia-passes-social-media-ban-children-under-16-2024-11-28/> - Australia has enacted a new law banning children under the age of 16 from using social media, marking one of the strictest regulations against Big Tech globally. The legislation, set for enforcement in a year's time following a trial starting in January, mandates tech companies like Meta and TikTok to prevent minors from logging in, with violations incurring fines of up to A$49.5 million. This move arises from concerns over social media's negative impact on youth mental health. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's administration pushed the bill through parliament despite resistance from privacy advocates and some child rights groups, highlighting a strong public backing with 77% support. The law may strain US-Australian relations and deepen existing tensions with tech giants primarily based in the US. While the bill aims to mitigate cyberbullying and improve youth safety, critics argue it could exclude vulnerable youths from support networks and raise privacy issues due to increased data collection for age verification. Some youth advocates believe it won't effectively address the underlying problems and might lead to more dangerous online behaviors among teenagers.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/88a2a616-2370-41c4-9c0d-7c1112236dc8> - Australia has enacted a world-first law that bans children under 16 from using major social media platforms, including TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Reddit, even with parental permission. This move, driven by concerns over youth mental health, has significant implications for social media companies whose revenue relies heavily on the engagement and activity of younger users. These platforms face fines of up to $32.5 million for non-compliance. The law could set a precedent affecting global social media policies and revenues, as young users are crucial to ad revenue and platform engagement. TikTok, with a large percentage of its audience under 34, is particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, the effectiveness and privacy implications of age-verification technology remain concerns. The ban raises questions about mental health impacts, enforcement feasibility, and privacy issues, with potential significant economic ramifications if adopted by other countries.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/nov/26/australia-should-delay-social-media-ban-until-age-check-trial-finishes-google-and-meta-say> - Google and Meta have called for a delay in Australia's proposed social media ban for under-16s until the completion of a trial assessing age-assurance technologies. The companies argue that proceeding without the trial's results could lead to ineffective legislation and unintended consequences. The trial, led by the Age Check Certification Scheme, is expected to conclude in mid-2025. Both tech giants emphasize the need for clarity and certainty regarding the platforms affected by the ban and the feasibility of implementing age verification measures. The call for delay highlights concerns about the rushed nature of the bill and the potential for regulatory overreach.
5. <https://www.themandarin.com.au/292366-tech-used-to-trial-ways-to-enforce-australias-under-16s-social-media-ban-is-flawed/> - Australia's move to ban under-16s from social media is receiving widespread praise. Other countries, including the UK, Ireland, Singapore, and Japan, are also now reportedly considering similar moves. The ban was legislated in November 2024 and is due to take effect in December 2025. The law says social media platforms can't use official IDs such as passports to check Australian users' ages, and shouldn't track Australians. But it doesn't specify the alternative. To test alternative methods, the federal government commissioned a trial of currently available technologies designed to 'assure' people's age online. Run by the Age Check Certification Scheme, a UK-based company specialising in testing and certifying identity verification systems, the trial is in its final stages. Results are expected at the end of June. So what are the technologies being trialled? Are they likely to work? And how might they — and the social media ban itself — alter the relationship all of us have with our dominant forms of digital communication?
6. <https://www.cnbctv18.com/technology/australia-ban-social-media-for-children-under-16-experts-explain-if-it-is-practically-possible-19517483.htm> - As the 11-year-old indicated, users could always lie about their age, log in via older people's devices, or find other ways around the restrictions. This raises the question of whether the ban is practically enforceable. CNBC-TV18 reached out to global experts to explore this concern. 'Challenges to the ban exist, but the government passed the law anyway' Before experts weighed in, Australian PM Anthony Albanese addressed parents, acknowledging the challenges in implementation: 'We don't argue that its implementation will be perfect, just like the alcohol ban for under-18s doesn't mean that someone under 18 never has access, but we know that it's the right thing to do.' Lizzie O'Shea, co-founder and chair of the Australian digital rights advocacy group Digital Rights Watch, told CNBC-TV18 that it remains unclear how effective the ban will be, as many practical implementation questions remain unanswered. 'There will be workarounds, and the type of age assurance that can be used is not mandated. It will depend on the quality of technology and the position taken by platforms, among other factors,' she said. O'Shea, who is also a principal lawyer and human rights advocate, noted that VPNs could facilitate workarounds, which the government likely anticipated but chose not to alter its course. 'Tech-savvy kids can bypass curbs, no system is foolproof' Kalindhi Bhatia, Partner at Delhi-based BTG Advaya, explained that many children are incredibly tech-savvy and can bypass restrictions by using VPNs, lying about their age, or logging into another person's account (who is over 16). She suggested that for the ban to be effective, social media platforms would need to implement sophisticated age verification systems. This could include requiring users to upload government-issued IDs during account creation, verifying those IDs, or using advanced AI tools to analyze user behavior and detect activity resembling that of a minor under 16. 'Even then, no system is completely foolproof. It would require a coordinated effort between platforms, parents, and policymakers for any chance of success.' Who will take responsibility? Parents, social media companies, or the government?
7. <https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/students/blogs/australia-social-media-ban-under-16s> - In response to growing concerns about social media's impact on young Australians, the government passed the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 (‘the Act’). The Act raises the minimum age for creating social media accounts from 13 to 16 and aims to hold platforms accountable for protecting children online. It applies to services that allow users to interact, post, and share content, such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, X, and TikTok, and requires them to take ’reasonable steps’ to prevent under-16s from creating accounts, with penalties of up to $49.5 million for non-compliance. The new age restrictions are expected to come into force by December 2025, giving platforms time to develop and implement age-verification systems. As the first law of its kind worldwide to lift the minimum age for social media use to 16, the move marks a bold step — but one that raises questions about its real-world impact on young Australians, and whether the benefits will outweigh the risks.