FOI 25-204 - Document 1

Australian Government
Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Age Assurance Trial – Consultation Roundtable Summary

Themes: Benefits, Harms, Actions

Youth

Date	14 August 2024: Office for Youth – Youth Steering Committee 22 August 2024: eSafety Youth Advisory Council
Objective	To hear about: • Experiences of the benefits and harms of social media • Views on what is an appropriate age to begin using social media • Willingness to engage with age assurance technologies to access social media
Attendees	24 attendees from 2 youth bodies

Key Messages	*Benefits*
	• Young people strongly support social media as a tool for forming and maintaining connections with friends, family, work networks and community groups – particularly for young people with family in different states or countries, or those who live in regional or remote areas.
	• Other promoted benefits of access to social media included the ability to:
	  ○ Broaden horizons and challenge biases, including by learning about other cultures and countries
	  ○ Stay up to date with news, politics and events (local and global) – including through access to perspectives that might not appear in mainstream media
	  ○ Access opportunities and broaden professional network
	Harms
	• However, young people recognise the significant **harms** posed by social media, including:
	  ○ Detriment to mental health, including addictive behaviours
	  ○ Mindless engagement, including 'doomscrolling' – i.e. algorithms determining what's seen (lack of agency)
	  ○ Lack of control over digital footprint
	  ○ Addiction, including decreased attention span
	• It is important to recognise the different levels of harm posed by different platforms. In particular, young people questioned whether **messaging apps** would be included under any legislated age restrictions.

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	Actions • Young Australians largely believe that **all parties are responsible** for keeping young people safe online, however, emphasised that **social media companies should be primarily responsible** for making their platforms safe, with government to support with appropriate regulations. • When asked 'How likely would you be to use an age assurance technology to access social media?', participants responded: ○ 64% Likely, 27% Very Likely, 9% Neutral.

Parents/carers and child-development experts

Date	16 August 2024
Objective	To hear about: • Experiences with their children using social media • Views on an appropriate minimum age for social media access • Attitudes towards age assurance technologies
Attendees	23 attendees from 13 organisations
Key Messages	• Parents are overwhelmed with the prospect of managing children's social media access, and are calling for a cultural and/or legal change, with some suggesting legislating an age limit now and implementing enforcement in the short-medium term. • Children have a right to access safe shared online spaces, and striking a balance between the benefits and the harms is key. *Benefits* • Social media has many benefits, including a way to talk to and connect with friends, establish identity, and as a regulation tool for neurodivergent children (e.g. Roblox). *Harms* • It also can be addictive, provides an avenue for cyberbullying, and algorithms show harmful or inappropriate content (e.g. horror, pornography) that children don't want to see. *Actions* • Social media needs to be defined and potentially not include messaging apps. • An age limit for social media had strong majority support at 16 or 18 (with notable support for 18), however some thought 16 was too old. • Digital literacy education for children and parents is critical. Parents need strategies to create healthy screen routines and support children to safely use technology.

Academia

Date	23 August 2024
Objective	To gain insight into academic findings in relation to: • Benefits or harms to youth on social media • Appropriate minimum age for social media access • Australians' attitudes towards the use of age assurance technologies
Attendees	15 attendees from 12 institutions

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Key Messages	• There were strong and at times conflicting views on the issue of social media harms from the perspectives of attendees. *Benefits* • Forming social ties online is important for people who are marginalised. • Media and digital literacy. • Convention of the rights of the child – right to privacy, social experience. • Efforts being made to keep kids out – change that to regulating tech companies to create appropriate online spaces for children and teens. *Harms* • Children's age to exposure to sexual and violent content is getting younger and younger. There is link between exposure to pornography and early sexual experiences. • Increase in sextortion of young children. • Children report seeing unwanted ads, can't control algorithms to curate their feeds. Seeing sexist, racist and homophobic content. • We do not have longitudinal data about the impact smart phones and social media has on children. • Children are being groomed by the apps to be lifetime users. *Actions* • Age verification is important, but **one of many supports** needed, particularly **education**. • Mental health is complex and there is not one solution, but the complexity should not cause a standstill. Age Assurance may not be perfect but still worth doing. • Platforms should be more responsible.

Industry: platforms/hardware providers

Date	27 August 2024
Objective	To gain insight into: • Current age assurance and detection practices of platforms, including planned responses to regulations proposed internationally • Industry's capability and willingness to implement further age assurance technologies
Attendees	23 attendees from 12 organisations
Key messages	*Benefits* • Out of scope for this discussion. *Harms* • Participants noted that there are different levels of harm from types of adult content and highlighted the importance of hearing the views of safety advocates and young people. • It is important to clearly define what harms we are seeking to address (particularly on social media) as a first step to determine an effective and proportionate solution.

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	• For pornographic material, there were concerns that age verification at the website level has resulted in users choosing to use alternative sites rather than verify their age. An unintended consequence of this is that users move to websites that have poor content moderation processes to manage illegal material. *Actions* • Industry emphasised the importance of alignment with international regulatory approaches when it comes to age assurance. • There was broad recognition that responsibility for user safety sits at **all levels** of the tech stack – device level, app store, platforms, websites – therefore a **multi-tiered** approach to age assurance is required. • Highlighted the importance of future proofing any policy or regulatory response, particularly as the digital environment in the near future could be very different to how users engage with platforms today. • Getting policy principles right to frame our approach to the issue. Suggested establishing policy principles that guide our approach to the issue of age assurance, including that responsibility sits at multiple levels, proportionality of response to harms, subsidiarity – regulating the point of access.

s22(1)(a)(ii)

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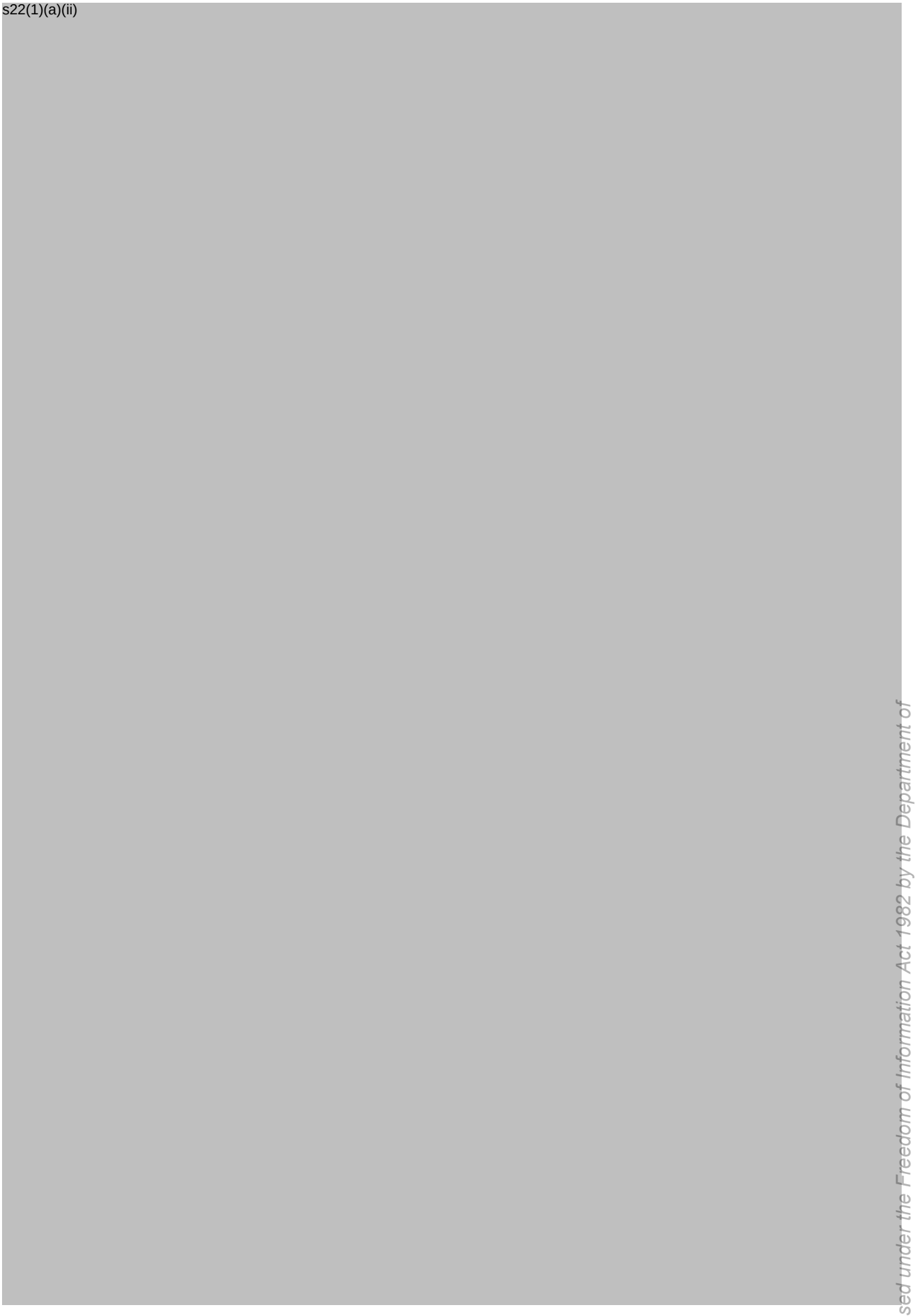

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