

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on **SOCIAL MEDIA** and the **AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY**

About batyr

batyr's vision is that all young people should lead mentally healthy and fulfilling lives. As leaders in preventative mental health education, we give young people the skills and tools to get through tough times, and to look after their mental health, before reaching a crisis point. Our innovative peer-to-peer programs and digital interventions for young people aged 14-30 are proven to reduce stigma, increase help seeking and improve mental health outcomes for young people and their communities.

As an organisation that reaches thousands of young people every year, we believe it's our responsibility to listen to and understand their experiences, and to elevate their voices in the decisions that affect them.

Through our own research, as well as projects done in collaboration with academic partners, we explore questions that are important to young people. We do this with the view that young people are the experts in their own lives. We gather insights from young people through our programs, and through mental health stories shared by our storytellers, including those shared through the OurHerd app. We work collaboratively with young people to interpret their data and insights and develop research outputs that reflect their points of view. All our research is done with the end goal of applying what we learn in the real world, either through refining our programs or influencing policy and practice.



Introduction

batyr welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society.

Our submission is in relation to the following Terms of Reference:

- (a) the use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media;
- (d) the algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health; and
- (e) other issues in relation to harmful or illegal content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted content, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material.

Youth Voice

The current generation of children and young people are growing up online. In 2020, around 46% of children aged 6 to 13 used a mobile phone device (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2022). This shows an increase from previous years, reflecting the growing integration of technology in young people's lives. As the first generations to be raised with such unprecedented access to the internet and technology, young people are understandably in the spotlight when we talk about social media. Despite this, research has shown that online safety is largely an adult dominated conversation, with young people often talked at, and not to or with (Marsden et al. 2022; Maidment et al. 2024). Involving young people through targeted consultation is an important element of moving forward in a productive and sustainable manner.

batyr has seen the power of integrating youth voices in the issues that relate to their lives; it's ability to build long term trust, generate unique insights and ensure outcomes are effective and impactful. There are few issues that are more inextricably entangled with young people's lives than social media. They are the experts. It is integral that they are a part of the decisions and policy making on this topic moving forward and that their voices are heard.

As part of our efforts to ensure young people are centred in this conversation, this submission has been guided by batyr's community of young people including our National Youth Advisory Group, and was written by batyr's Youth Advocacy Lead, a role designated to be held by a young person under 25. We also acknowledge the important contributions of other organisations who work alongside young people, including Prevention United's 'The impact of screen time and social media on the mental health of young Australians' (2024), and the Young & Resilient Research Centre's 'Reimagining online safety education through the eyes of young people: co-design workshops with young people to inform digital learning experience' (2022).

Balancing the conversation

As a leading youth mental health organisation that engages with thousands of young people every year, batyr constantly hears of the complex relationship between social media and youth mental health. The need for safer, more responsible social media cannot be overstated. We acknowledge the negative impact that social media use can have on young people's wellbeing and believe that through a whole community approach, we can empower young people and give them the tools to navigate this new online world. The young people in our network highlighted a diverse range of avenues through which change can be made, including the importance of regulation and legislation, as well as education and skill building in creating safer online spaces.

We also believe it is important to acknowledge the positive and protective aspects of social media for young people, including its ability to provide safe spaces for connection and self expression (Maidment et al. 2024). batyr's [Being There](#) report highlighted the unique role of social media in allowing young people to identify if and when their friends are going through a tough time, and the role of online spaces in being a place where young people support each other through tough times (Hanckel et al. 2022).

Our safe digital platform [OurHerd](#) is a primary example of how elements of social media and data can be used as a force for good. OurHerd was created as a safe, moderated storytelling app that provides an alternative space for young people to open up about their experiences and learn from each other. Sentiment analysis, AI and machine learning allows us to capture qualitative and quantitative data to draw insights from the lived experience stories shared, which is fed back to key decision-makers. In essence, utilising core features of social media platforms to inform system change and ensure young people are at the heart of decision making. According to the 2023 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, 24.8% of young people are lonely (Wilkins et al. 2024). Platforms like OurHerd allow young people to maintain the community, connection and autonomy they deeply need, whilst increasing safety by moderating all content and providing guidelines around safe storytelling.

Young people such as batyr National Youth Advisory Group member, Alexandria Brown, are eager to see more balance brought to this conversation:

"Policy makers should remember not to demonize social media, because it plays a critical role in the way young people make friends, connect with the world around them and learn. Through the pandemic, this generation of young people had to rely on social media as their sole form of connection to peers, and have therefore grown up with social media as a cornerstone of connection and relationships. Because of the knowledge and education about the potential harms of social media use, young people are also more literate about safe use of these platforms than I think decision-makers give them credit for. Instead of focusing on the negative impacts and considering drastic measures like bans (which, in my opinion, are unlikely to be effective), decision-makers should investigate how to support young people to use social media in a safe manner"

We recognise the importance of protecting children from the potential harms of social media and we feel education and skills building alongside regulation and accountability from social media companies, are all critical components to supporting every young person in navigating the online world. The relationship between social media and mental health is complex, and as such requires an equally nuanced response.

Key Recommendations

Young people want a future where they can play, learn and connect online safely. To move towards this, batyr recommends the following actions be jointly prioritised in any response in order to protect young people and promote positive mental wellbeing and social media use.

1. Embed specific and targeted mechanisms to consult directly with young people, prioritising their voices in the ongoing conversation on social media. Young people must be deeply involved in the policy making process moving forward.
2. Pursue policy responses that reflect the unique relationship that young people have with the online world, that protect young people's autonomy and their safe spaces, whilst also addressing the potential harms of social media and its impact on youth mental health.
3. Collaborate with organisations such as batyr that work directly with young people and their communities to ensure the solution includes the experiences and voices of the young people who this decision will directly impact.

As an organisation that works alongside young people every day, batyr has distinct expertise when it comes to embedding young people in the work we do. We would welcome an opportunity to share our learnings and amplify the voices of the young people in our community.

References

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