

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society

Prepared by

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on behalf of the

National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research

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Public Submission



Committee Secretariat

Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society
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Dear Committee Secretariat,

The National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research (NCYSUR), at The University of Queensland, would like to provide a public submission to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society.

The submission covers the following Terms of References:

- (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
- (f) Any related matters

Evidence presented in this submission was drawn from published peer reviewed scientific literature and original research conducted by NCYSUR.

Yours sincerely, on behalf of co-authors,

Dr Tesfa Yimer

About the National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research

Established in 2008, the National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research (NCYSUR) is the only Australian research centre focusing exclusively on young people and substance use.

NCYSUR seeks to promote the health and well-being of young people by increasing Australia's capacity to respond effectively to the harm associated with alcohol, tobacco, and other drug misuse. NCYSUR is dedicated to an evidence-based understanding of and responses to youth substance use. Our research includes supporting individuals and families who need help, working with schools and communities in a prevention framework, and policy and population level interventions to enhance the health outcomes of young people.

Executive Summary

Social media platforms have become a major part of young Australians' lives. While these platforms have many benefits, they also expose youth to content that promotes substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes, and illicit drugs. This is concerning because:

1. There are often no effective age restrictions on this content.
2. Substance-related posts are widely available and mostly show drug use in a positive light.
3. Young people are seeing alcohol related advertisements on social media every few minutes.
4. Exposure to this content can normalise substance use by young people and undermine the perceived harms of substance use.

The Australian government and social media companies need to work together to protect young people from this harmful content. This could include better age verification, stricter content policies, and using technology to detect and remove posts promoting illegal substances.

Background

The growing prevalence and accessibility of social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram have transformed the way Australians, particularly youth, learn about and engage with various topics. While these platforms offer many benefits, they have also become a conduit for the widespread promotion and normalisation of substance use. The Australian National Drug Strategy 2017-2026 outlines Australia's commitment to harm minimisation through a balanced approach of demand, supply, and harm reduction (Department of Health, 2017). The widespread availability of substance use related content on these social media platforms is a challenge to harm minimisation attempts. This is particularly relevant for the most vulnerable of our population—young people—who are the largest consumers of these social media platforms.

Response to the Terms of Reference

The use of age verification to protect Australian children from social media

Research conducted by NCYSUR has tracked how substance use is portrayed on major social media platforms, including TikTok, X (previously known as Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Our research has found that positive portrayal of substance-related content and promotion are widely available on social media, often without any age restrictions on access:

- Strong, positive portrayal of substance use were widely available across major social media platforms. We identified over 15 million substance related social media posts, and majority (76.3%) of content portrayed substance use positively (Rutherford et al., 2023).
- Specifically, our research on cannabis related content on TikTok (one of the most popular platforms among young people), we found that over half (54%) of videos portrayed cannabis use positively, associating it with humour, desirable lifestyles, and social acceptance. None of the videos had age restrictions (Rutherford, Sun, Johnson, et al., 2022).
- Similarly, when we examined TikTok videos relating to e-cigarettes we found that the majority (63%) depicted vaping positively. These vaping videos likely have a far reach as they have collectively been viewed over 1.1 billion times (Sun et al., 2021). Concerningly, as above, they can be viewed with no age restriction. Most of these videos remained publicly accessible for long durations. Most of these videos remained publicly accessible for extended periods. We conducted research to determine their accessibility after 9 and 12 months. Our findings show that 70.1% of these videos were still accessible at the 9-month follow-up and 63.7% at the 12-month follow-up (Rutherford, Sun, Lim, et al., 2022).
- Recently, we conducted research to assess how frequently alcohol advertisements are shown to young people (17-25 years old) on Facebook or Instagram. Our finding was that the majority of young people, including underage age youths, were exposed to alcohol advertising. Among these young people, they are shown an alcohol advertisement every 3 minutes on average (Rutherford, Leung, Stjepanović, & Chan, 2024).

These findings revealed a troubling picture of the substance-related content that Australian youth are regularly exposed to on social media. The lack of effective age restrictions enables widespread access to videos and advertisements that glamorise and encourage substance

use. This finding was particularly concerning because young people, who are the primary consumers of these platforms, are increasingly spending more time engaging with social media.

Beyond promotion and positive portrayal of substance use, social media platforms have become channels for illegal substance distribution. For example, e-cigarettes are being covertly marketed on Facebook marketplaces (Lim, Sun, Vu, Chan, & Leung, 2024). Listings of e-cigarettes are camouflaged as ‘fruit’ listings, appearing when users search for e-cigarette brands that are known to contain nicotine, such as “iGet”. These listings often provide seller contacts, bulk-buy discounts, and door-to-door delivery options, all without any age restrictions on accessibility. Work by other researchers has found that Instagram (Jancey et al., 2024) and TikTok (Jancey et al., 2023) are similarly used, offering detailed information on how and where to purchase e-cigarette products. These posts may include monetary incentives or non-monetary offers to entice potential buyers. Despite clear or potential violations of platform content policies, such content remain accessible without any age restriction.

Numerous social media platforms have implemented warning labels and fact-checking measures to counter health misinformation, particularly concerning COVID-19. This strategy could be usefully extended to information regarding vaping and substance use. Social media platforms can utilise their capabilities to train systems for identifying and flagging content related to the sale and promotion of prohibited items like vaping products. Advancements in artificial intelligence could potentially detect not only explicit mentions of substances but also coded language, imagery, and behavioural patterns shown by illicit sellers (Lim et al., 2024).

Government health authorities may also explore collaboration with social media platforms to curb the promotion of substances. A notable example is the collaboration between the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and platforms like TikTok to combat posts promoting the off-label use of the diabetes drug Ozempic for weight loss (Yosufzai, 2023). The dissemination of such content on social media led to a shortage of Ozempic supply in Australia prior to this regulatory intervention. Furthermore, governments have the capacity to employ legal and regulatory frameworks to hold both domestic and foreign entities accountable for marketing activities that target or impact consumers within their jurisdiction. This may entail imposing fines, restrictions, or legal action against non-compliant companies (Lim et al., 2024).

The algorithms, recommender systems and corporate decision making of digital platforms in influencing what Australians see, and the impacts of this on mental health

All social media platforms use proprietary recommender systems to push “relevant” content to users. There is no transparency in how these systems work. Based on our experience during conducting our social media research, when we search for substance-related content for our research on these platforms, we receive more advertisements and content that promotes alcohol, e-cigarette and other substance use in our own social media accounts. At the end of our aforementioned research on TikTok, over 90% of content recommended to our account glamorised substance use. Exposure to substance-related content on social media is not merely prevalent - growing evidence produced by NCYSUR suggests that it can significantly influence youth attitudes and behaviours around alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes, and other drugs. Exposure to predominantly positive substance use content on these platforms undermines perceptions of harm, fosters positive attitudes, and heightens intentions to use, with consequential effects on purchasing and usage (Cheng et al., 2024; Rutherford et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2021).

- Our study demonstrates that youth exposure to tobacco and e-cigarette content on social media was associated with increased use, susceptibility to use, and lower risk perceptions (Rutherford et al., 2023).
- Both viewing and self-posting of alcohol-related social media content were linked to higher alcohol consumption and greater alcohol-related problems among youth (Cheng et al., 2024).
- Regular viewing of positive cannabis-related advertisements and social media content has been shown to desensitise adolescents, normalise use, and increase initiation and escalation of cannabis use (Kelleghan et al., 2020; McClure-Thomas et al., 2024; Rutherford, Sun, Johnson, et al., 2022).

These findings underscore the power of social media to shape young people's perceptions and behaviours around substance use. By allowing the proliferation of content that normalises and encourages use, current social media environments may be contributing to increased substance use and related harms among Australian youth.

Any related matters

Leveraging social media platforms for substance use prevention educational campaign

Government agencies and public health organisations in the United States have recognised the potential of social media as a powerful platform with extensive reach to communicate health risks associated with vaping to youth and the public. Consequently, they have launched various anti-vaping social media campaigns, such as “The Real Cost” on Instagram and Facebook, as well as “Quit Together” on TikTok (truth initiative, 2021; US Food & Drug Administration, 2022). These initiatives may have contributed to a decrease in the prevalence of current vaping among high school students in the US, dropping from 14.1% in 2022 to 10.0% in 2023 (Birdsey et al., 2023). Nevertheless, social media posts discussing the potential health impacts of vaping are greatly outnumbered by pro-vaping content and garners less user engagement. Hence, research on how to most effectively harness social media platforms to reach and educate young individuals about the risks of substances should be sustained.

Campaign strategies could involve the use of social media platforms to disseminate anti-substance use ads tailored for young people or specific demographic groups. This may involve engaging with social media influencers to generate and promote this content. For instance, the Australian Government has begun implementing an influencer-led campaign to initiate conversations among young Australians about the harms of vaping and nicotine addiction (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2024). Leveraging social influencers can capitalise on their established audience relationships, authenticity, and effective communication of health-related information (Kostygina et al., 2020). However, the potential risks associated with this approach involve the influencers' control over content sharing and their actions and opinions on unrelated topics could impair their credibility. Government initiatives could vet influencers and include risk mitigation plans (Jongenelis, 2024). Engaging young people in co-designing campaign messages can ensure their relevance to the target audience, capture their attention and address their specific concerns (Alderson, 2024). Further research and more funding are needed to leverage social media for anti-substance use campaigns. We at NCYSUR are working by engaging youths aged 14-25 years from diverse cultural backgrounds in a project to co-design anti-vaping materials for an educational campaign on social media.

Conclusions

The widespread presence of substance-related content on social media poses a significant risk to Australian youth. Our research shows that this content is easily accessible, often portrays substance use positively, and can influence young people's attitudes and behaviours. Protecting young people from substance related social media content needs:

1. Implementing stronger age verification measures on social media platforms.
2. Developing better systems to detect and remove content that promotes illegal substances.
3. Strong regulation on social media companies to enforce content moderation and age restriction on substance-related content.
4. Using social media for targeted anti-substance use campaigns

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