

BMJ Open Impact of the Social Media Minimum Age on Australian young people and parents: protocol for a mixed-methods evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Australia implemented the *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* (Cth; SMMA) on 10 December 2025. This policy represents a world-first social media age-restriction, which requires age-restricted social media platforms to take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under the age of 16 from creating or keeping an account. Preliminary estimates suggest that approximately 1 194 000 young people should be affected by the deactivation of accounts. As the SMMA is enacted, we are collecting data to examine the outcomes for young people, parents and families. This study protocol paper serves as a summary of the methodological design for the evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of the SMMA, including (a) young people's adherence, and the SMMA's impact on (b) their digital practices; (c) their physical, psychological and social well-being; (d) their families and (e) community attitudes and dynamics. Adherence refers to a participant's experience of account removal/deactivation and any attempts to bypass or circumvent those restrictions. The term is used solely for brevity, and we acknowledge that children and parents are not subject to legal obligations under the SMMA.

Methods and analysis To evaluate the impact of the SMMA implementation, a mixed-methods approach is being undertaken, involving 4121 young people aged 10 to 16 years and their parents or caregivers. Data collection involves five-wave longitudinal parent-child surveys, opt-in passive smartphone tracking, administrative linked and non-linked health and educational data, qualitative interviews and focus groups. We will conduct descriptive analyses examining frequencies, average values, percentages, factor analysis and reliability of scales for each survey wave. Various analytical approaches (eg, logistic regressions, multi-level modelling, random-intercept cross-lagged panel model) may be used to understand both between-person and within-person changes pre- and post-implementation of the SMMA. For causal inference analyses, we will employ targeted

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

- ⇒ The study draws on parent-child dyadic longitudinal surveys, in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus groups, passive sensing data and population-level administrative datasets to assess the short-, medium- and long-term impacts of the Social Media Minimum Age (SMMA) on young peoples' digital experiences, well-being, family dynamics and community attitudes.
- ⇒ The study tracks young people and their caregivers across five waves over 2 years, using predominantly psychometrically validated instruments from prior research, with novel measures developed where no suitable existing scales were available to capture SMMA-specific constructs.
- ⇒ The sampling approach intentionally oversampled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations to ensure their representativeness in the findings.
- ⇒ Attrition rates are anticipated to be high across the five waves.
- ⇒ The relatively modest estimated sample in the final wave may constrain statistical power.

maximum likelihood estimation (TMLE) as our primary strategy to evaluate the effect of young people's adherence to the SMMA on key outcomes, such as psychosocial well-being and distress. Qualitative data will be analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and structured coding approaches. This will include iterative analysis of open-ended survey responses and in-depth qualitative data from interviews, focus groups and related tasks to identify key themes, patterns and lived experiences.

Ethics and dissemination The study received ethical approval from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Human Research Ethics Committee (application approval number 2025/06) and complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research. All participants provided informed consent at the beginning of the baseline survey and in each subsequent wave. Only parents and young people who provided their consent were eligible to take part in the study. Findings from this evaluation will inform national policy oversight and implementation in Australia, contribute empirical evidence to international debates and inform other countries considering similar age-based regulation of social media. Results will be disseminated through public-facing reports, peer-reviewed publications and stakeholder engagement activities to support evidence-informed decision-making in digital safety regulation in Australia and internationally.

INTRODUCTION

Social media use among young people has become near-universal, with adolescents spending substantial portions of their daily lives online.^{1–3} Against this backdrop, concerns about the potential harms of social media on youth well-being have intensified, driving public debate, media coverage and policy action across the globe.^{4,5}

A range of potential harms associated with social media use have been identified, including exposure to cyberbullying and victimisation,⁶ exposure to harmful content and experiences of online hate,^{1,7} heightened sensitivity to social feedback and peer rejection through metrics such as likes and follower counts,^{8,9} upward social comparison processes reinforced by algorithmically curated and idealised content¹⁰ and digital stress arising from pressure to remain constantly available and responsive online.¹¹

In response to these concerns, a growing number of governments have introduced or are pursuing regulatory frameworks¹² that restrict or limit adolescents' access to social media. However, the empirical literature on social media use and mental health and well-being outcomes presents a more complex picture. Several large-scale reviews and meta-analyses examining associations between social media use and mental health and well-being outcomes have generally found these relationships to be small, inconsistent in direction and often confounded by other factors.^{13–16}

Accordingly, there is an urgent need to develop a robust evidence base to inform policy decisions regarding early social media use restrictions.^{4,17} The nationwide *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* (Cth), hereafter SMMA, in Australia provides an opportunity to evaluate the impact of early social media use restrictions on young people, families and society. The SMMA commenced on 10 December 2025 with the intention of restricting those younger than 16 from having or creating social media accounts on a select set of online platforms. The Australian eSafety Commissioner (hereafter eSafety) is closely monitoring the implementation and formally evaluating the outcomes of the policy intended to delay access to social media. eSafety's Research and Evaluation team is leading the evaluation in partnership with the Lead Academic Partner for the evaluation, the Stanford Social Media Lab, supported by an Academic Advisory Group (AAG) (see announcement for role and list of members). This protocol paper provides an overview of

our study aims and design, sampling strategies, measures and general analytical approach for the evaluation over a 24-month period as well as ethics, data management and governance.

Aims of the study

The evaluation includes the following aims:

1. Assess young people's adherence to the SMMA, including their knowledge, awareness and understanding of SMMA, their experience of deactivation of social media accounts and any circumvention.
2. Examine changes in young people's digital practices, including media literacy, exposure to online harms and potential displacement or substitution effects across digital and offline activities.
3. Evaluate the impact of the SMMA on young people's well-being, including psychological, social and physical well-being, including their experience in school.
4. Assess impacts on parents and family life, including any changes in parental mediation practices, family cohesion and engagement in shared activities.
5. Assess impacts on community attitudes (peers and other parents) and dynamics, including any changes in social norms and attitudes towards the SMMA.

Across all aims, the study plans to track change over time and to identify differential effects with equal attention to the intended and unintended consequences, both positive and negative, across subgroups. Particular attention will be given to young people and families who may experience additional challenges or unintended consequences of the legislation, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Evaluation approach and planned studies

To assess the effectiveness of the SMMA, a mixed-methods, theory-based evaluation approach will be used. Theory-based evaluation uses the underlying theory of an intervention to guide evaluation design, implementation, and interpretation, with a focus on understanding how and why outcomes are expected to occur.¹⁸ eSafety developed a Theory of Change to specify the change pathways through which the legislation is expected to achieve its intended outcomes.

The Theory of Change was developed through a structured process that integrated evidence from a rapid literature review, stakeholder submissions to the Senate Committee, a survey and workshops with eSafety staff, consultation with eSafety's Youth Council, and input from academic collaborators. Insights from each of these sources were integrated to map the actors, inputs and activities necessary to support implementation of the SMMA legislation to the outputs and intended outcomes and impacts that are expected to flow from these, as well as the assumptions underpinning these change pathways. The model also highlights potential unintended consequences and external influences expected to influence the effectiveness of the SMMA.

A high-level depiction of the Theory of Change is presented in online supplemental file 1 in the Appendix. As illustrated in the figure, the model proposes that age assurance, account prevention and account removal measures on age-restricted social media platforms will reduce account ownership among under-16s and delay access to age-restricted social media. In turn, delayed access is expected to decrease exposure to harmful content, interactions and platform design features, while increasing opportunities for engagement with protective activities such as sleep, physical activity, education, recreation and in-person social connection. The Theory of Change also identifies parents and carers as important agents of change, with the legislation expected to promote conversations about online safety, strengthen digital literacy and resilience, and support healthier family relationships over time. Together, these changes are expected to contribute to improvements in online safety and mental health and well-being among children and young people in the long term.

The model is underpinned by several key assumptions, including effective platform compliance with age assurance requirements, the availability of safe alternative online and offline activities, parental capacity to support children through the transition and broader shifts in social norms regarding age-appropriate social media use. The Theory of Change posits that the achievement of intended outcomes is dependent on these underlying assumptions being met.

The Theory of Change also recognises the potential for unintended consequences, including attempts by children or their parents to bypass restrictions, migration to less regulated platforms, social exclusion or reduced access to supportive online communities. Accordingly, both intended and unintended outcomes will be monitored throughout the evaluation (Appendix online supplemental file 1).

The Theory of Change provided an overarching conceptual framework which guided and informed methodological choices for the study. It helped identify outcomes and variables related to the implementation of the policy to measure, and supports interpretation of findings. It also usefully informs, at a high level, the analytic procedures for the study, for example, by guiding specific hypotheses for testing, clarifying at which timepoints outcome variables might be more or less salient and what might be important to include as moderators or mediators of effects.

Primary and secondary outcomes were differentiated according to their relevance to the central aims of the evaluation and their role within the broader conceptual framework underpinning the study. Primary outcomes capture the core assumptions most directly linked to policy implementation, while secondary outcomes provide contextual and explanatory insight into the broader social, developmental and behavioural processes associated with young people's social media use. The inclusion of domains relating to school experiences

reflects the importance of schools as a key developmental and institutional context in which social media use intersects with learning, peer relationships and well-being, alongside broader social and environmental influences captured through measures of family, leisure and social experiences. Perceptions of peer attitudes and other parents' attitudes were similarly selected based on their theoretical and contextual relevance to young people's immediate social ecologies. Overall, the selection of measures was informed by a theory-driven and iterative process involving the research team and the AAG. An initial broad set of constructs derived from the Theory of Change was systematically reviewed and refined to balance conceptual breadth with feasibility and participant burden within the multi-wave panel design. This process resulted in the identification of five primary domains aligned with the central aims of the evaluation, alongside additional constructs considered theoretically and empirically important for understanding implementation and outcomes.

While this protocol provides a comprehensive overview of the overarching study aims, design, methods and data collection procedures, specific analytical decisions will necessarily vary across individual research questions and sub-studies within this large-scale, multi-wave mixed-methods project. Each of these sub-studies, in addition to the Theory of Change, will have a unique theoretically grounded rationale that draws on existing scientific literature, including prior empirical findings and established theoretical frameworks relevant to the constructs. This will involve a structured review of the literature to situate each research question within current scholarly debates and descriptions of analytical approaches. Relevant literature and theoretical frameworks for each research question will be explicitly specified in the rationale section of each pre-registration, ensuring that all analyses are conceptually driven, transparent, and based on prior research.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Study design

Our study design assesses Australian young people's and parents' and carers' experiences before and after the implementation of the SMMA using four approaches: (1) five surveys tracking between- and within-person changes over 2 years, (2) passive tracking assessments of smartphone use from a subset of survey participants who choose to opt-in, (3) qualitative research involving focus groups and interviews with Australian young people and their parents and caregivers and (4) assessment of linked administrative data from the subset of survey participants who choose to opt-in and provide consent to this linkage and population-level non-linked administrative datasets.

Multi-wave longitudinal survey

A major component of this evaluation is a multi-wave longitudinal survey involving young people aged 10–16

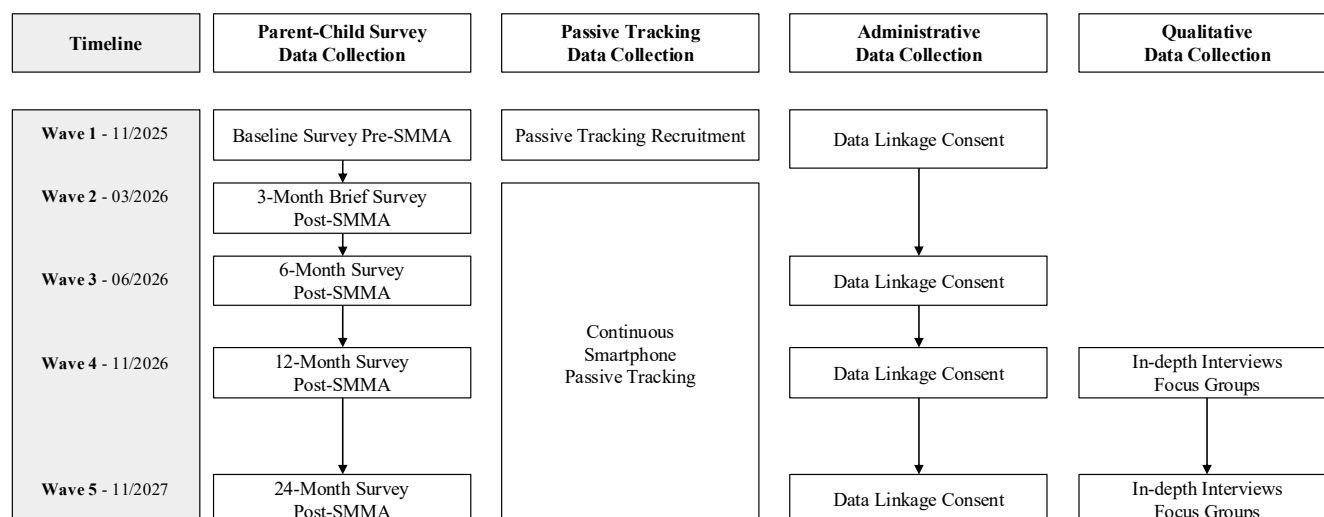


Figure 1 Illustration of the study design for the evaluation of the SMMA. SMMA, Social Media Minimum Age.

years and their respective parents or caregivers, using a paired parent-child sample and cohort to be followed over 2 years (see figure 1 for the design overview). Following recommended approaches from studies on temporal study designs, Collins and Graham¹⁹ and Hill *et al*²⁰ suggest that longitudinal studies require surveys to be appropriately spaced, while also maintaining a good relationship with the survey population. This allows for better retention rates, while avoiding participant burnout from surveys being too frequent. The following survey intervals were chosen to reflect these values, align with the underlying Theory of Change and track any change over time. The baseline survey was conducted between 18 November 2025 and 19 December 2025, to capture participants' behaviours, attitudes and well-being immediately prior to the implementation of the SMMA legislation. The legislation came into effect on 10 December 2025. Accordingly, participants who completed the survey on or after this date were additionally asked about any deactivation of their social media accounts to account for immediate policy-related changes. The second survey wave was conducted in March 2026, approximately 3 months after baseline, to assess short-term outcomes following the introduction of the legislation and policy change, with a particular focus on young people's adherence to and circumvention of the SMMA. The third wave is planned for June 2026, 3 months after the second wave and 6 months after the baseline survey, to examine short-term changes relative to baseline and to track early behavioural responses. The fourth wave is planned for November/December 2026, approximately 1 year after the implementation of the legislation, to assess medium-term outcomes, including indicators of well-being, family cohesion and family conflict. The fifth wave is planned

for November/December 2027, 2 years after implementation, to evaluate the long-term effects and developmental trajectories over time. Recruitment and data collection for each study wave are presented in table 1. Each survey takes approximately 20 min to complete, with the exception of Wave 2, which is a 10 min survey administered to a subsample of the study cohort. This approach enables timely monitoring of immediate outcomes and the identification of any unintended consequences, while minimising participant burden during the shorter intervals between Wave 1, Wave 2 and Wave 3. It also reduces the risk of attrition by avoiding repeated lengthy surveys in quick succession.

Passive smartphone sensing

To complement the multi-wave survey data, the study will incorporate passive tracking of young people's smartphone use, subject to informed consent from parents or caregivers and from young people. This method provides an objective measure of smartphone use behaviour and allows for the capture of real-world digital activity patterns without relying solely on self-report data, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Passive smartphone sensing enables the continuous collection of metadata relating to device and application usage, such as duration and frequency of use. These data will complement survey-based measures by providing more precise behavioural indicators of digital engagement and allowing for comparisons between self-reported and observed usage patterns across time. All passive sensing procedures will be implemented in accordance with strict ethical and privacy safeguards, with participants able to opt in voluntarily and withdraw at any time without penalty. No content-level data, such as messages, images or personal

Table 1 Data collection timeline			
Study wave	Description	Timing relative to implementation	
Wave 1	Baseline survey	3 weeks prior to and 1 week following SMMA commencement	Recruitment start date: 18 November 2025 Data collection end date: 19 December 2025
Wave 2	Follow-up survey 1	3-month post-SMMA commencement	8 April 2026
Wave 3	Follow-up survey 2	6 months post-SMMA commencement	Planned mid-June 2026
Wave 4	Follow-up survey 3	12 months post-SMMA commencement	Planned mid-December 2026
Wave 5	Qualitative study 1	12 months post-SMMA commencement	Planned ~ January 2027
	Follow-up survey 4	24 months post-SMMA commencement	Planned mid-November 2027
	Qualitative study 2	24 months post-SMMA commencement	Planned ~November 2027
SMMA, social media minimum age.			

communications, nor URLs will be collected; only meta-data necessary for the purposes of understanding usage patterns will be recorded.

Qualitative studies

Qualitative studies will be conducted to deepen understanding of the lived experiences of young people and their parents and caregivers, and to examine contextual factors that may influence outcomes observed in the quantitative data. Specifically, the qualitative studies aim to:

1. Explore lines of inquiry derived from the pre-implementation qualitative study,²¹ outlined in the *Qualitative Measurement* section.
2. Explore lines of inquiry that emerge from the quantitative results.
3. Deepen interpretation of the quantitative findings.

Qualitative studies will prioritise young people's and parents' and caregivers' own language, concepts, and reflections to support interpretation, enabling richer contextualisation and deeper understanding of the quantitative results. These studies will involve two waves of data collection, each involving at least 20 young people and 20 parents and caregivers.

Descriptions of the later-wave qualitative components are necessarily less detailed than those of other study components, as their final design will be informed by findings generated in earlier phases of this developmental evaluation. Detailed qualitative protocols, instruments and associated study materials will be finalised iteratively and made publicly available prior to implementation.

Key methods will include online chat-based focus groups, online in-depth, semi-structured interviews and creative pre- and post-tasks. Creative tasks may include collaging, taking screenshots of participants' social media feeds and micro diary entries to capture habits, experiences and associated feelings. These activities are scheduled for Waves 4–5, as illustrated in figure 1. Qualitative participants may contribute to multiple activities and/or study waves. Sampling approaches will vary according to the aims of each qualitative component and may include parent-child dyads or independently recruited parents and young people. Dyadic sampling will be employed where examination of family-level processes or relationships is required.

The evaluation will engage a minimum of two members of eSafety's Youth Council in a co-researcher capacity in each stage of the qualitative studies, including the interpretation of findings. Youth co-researchers have a diversity of lived experiences, including of online harms, bringing an important lens to the analysis of the qualitative results. Youth focus groups will be co-facilitated by a youth co-researcher and a named co-investigator. Parent and caregiver focus groups will be co-facilitated by two co-investigators. Interviews will be conducted by a named co-investigator. An additional co-investigator will be present in both focus groups and interviews in an observer role. All facilitating co-investigators have

extensive experience in qualitative facilitation and analysis, subject matter expertise related to the SMMA and recent experience facilitating the pre-implementation qualitative study described in the *Qualitative measurement* section.

Linked and non-linked administrative data

Linked administrative data refer to the integration of routinely collected records—typically gathered by government entities (eg, health or education records)—with research data pertaining to the same identified individuals. This linkage enables the construction of a more comprehensive longitudinal profile, which in this context can be used to inform policy analysis. In this study, it includes young people's Commonwealth health information provided by Services Australia, specifically Medicare Benefits Schedule data (eg, doctor visits and associated costs) and/or Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) data (eg, prescription medications dispensed through pharmacies), and education data from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). For young people under the age of 14 years, parental consent, along with the young person's assent, will be obtained to authorise access to the child's relevant MBS, PBS and/or NAPLAN records. For young people aged 14 years and over, direct consent will be sought from the young person. This is in line with Australian practices where adolescents from age 14 are generally considered capable of making decisions about their healthcare, including control over their My Health Record and other personal health information.²² As the cohort ages, young people who turn 14 years old during the study will be re-consented directly for data linkage in line with ethical requirements. Participants will also be offered further opportunities to opt into data linkage in future waves. Declining data linkage does not affect eligibility for participation in the cohort study.

Non-linked administrative data refers to data generated through routine administrative systems that are not matched to individual participants in a research study. These data are typically used in aggregate form to provide population-level indicators. In this study, non-linked administrative datasets will be used to examine broader trends and contextual factors that may influence or reflect the impact of the legislation, complementing insights derived from individual-level data. We will incorporate two key sources of population-level administrative data, including aggregate education records and medical service utilisation records. The evaluation may also draw on eSafety-held administrative data to inform young people's adherence to SMMA and changes in digital experiences within a broader population context. See the *Measurement* section for further details.

Participant recruitment and sampling

Parents or caregivers who have a child aged between 10 and 16 years living in Australia were invited to participate in the study in November and December 2025. Parents were recruited via the Social Research Centre's (SRC)

Life in Australia probability-based online panel and three non-probability online panels (ie, ORU, Octopus, PureProfile). After providing their consent, participants were asked to pass the survey link to their child, who was required to give their own assent. Quota sampling was used in order to achieve a representative sample. As shown in table 2, prior to the recruitment and data collection start, targeted quotas were derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 census data (filtered for young people aged 10–16 years). Target quotas have been set for age, gender, state or territory, area and region to align with the Australian population (aged 10–16) profile. The SRC monitored recruitment quotas of young people while the survey was in the field and managed the sample to increase the likelihood of quotas being achieved (eg, by sending additional invitations to panel participants from underfilled quota groups, where relevant demographic characteristics were known).

The sample comprises participants from both a probability panel and non-probability panels. The probability panel acts as a spine for data collection, helping to moderate or reduce the bias inherent in using non-probability samples.²³ The use of probability and non-probability samples in tandem ('blending') leverages the statistical rigour of probability sampling while drawing on complementary sources to improve accuracy, reduce bias and better reflect the complexity of real-world populations.²⁴ Compared with relying solely on non-probability data, this blended approach yields more representative estimates.²⁵

Survey participants receive nominal incentives consistent with each panel provider's guidelines. For surveys with an estimated total completion time of 40 min, comprising approximately 20 min for parents and 20 min for young people, participants receive approximately \$20, with incentive values increasing incrementally for longer survey durations. Participants taking part in focus groups of 45–60 min receive between \$60 and \$75, depending on session length, while interview participants receive between \$40 and \$75 depending on interview duration. Creative activities are compensated separately from interviews and focus groups, with incentive amounts commensurate with the anticipated time commitment required for each activity. Participants who opt into passive smartphone sensing receive a \$10 installation incentive in addition to an ongoing activity incentive of \$15 for each month the app remains active on their device. Participants completing data linkage forms receive a \$5 incentive in recognition of the time required. For all activities involving young people, payments are made to parents or caregivers, who are responsible for passing the incentive on to the child or young person.

Power analysis

To ensure representation across diverse communities and sociodemographic groups, we based our initial calculation on a small-to-medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.2$) for the overall sample and aimed to recruit the largest feasible

Table 2 Targeted and achieved quotas overview

Young people demographics	Population (10–16 years old)	Online sample %	Online sample N	Achieved sample %*	Achieved sample N*
Gender by age		Target (quota)	Target (quota)	Achieved	Achieved
Male aged 10–13	29.9%	29%	1160	30%	1230
Female aged 10–13	28.3%	27%	1080	24%	992
Male aged 14–16	21.6%	20%	800	24%	992
Female aged 14–16	20.2%	19%	760	21%	882
Other than cisgender (any age)	Unknown	Natural fall-out (up to 6%)		1%	25
State/territory					
New South Wales	31.5%	31%	1240	31%	1272
Victoria	24.6%	25%	1000	27%	1118
Queensland	21.6%	21%	840	19%	794
Western Australia	10.8%	11%	440	10%	421
South Australia	6.6%	7%	280	7%	298
Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Northern Territory	4.8%	5%	200	5%	217
Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas					
The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage Quintile 1 ¹	18.5%	19%	760	15%	635
The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage Quintile 2	19.3%	19%	760	18%	747
The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage Quintile 3	20.5%	20%	800	24%	1008
The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage Quintile 4	20.7%	21%	840	23%	940
The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage Quintile 5	20.9%	21%	840	19%	788
Remoteness					
Major cities ²	71.1%	71%	2840	77%	3186
Regional and remote areas	28.9%	29%	1160	23%	934
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander		Minimum (quota)			
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ³	6.0%	6%	240	9%	357
Total	100%	100%	4000	100%	4121

*Numbers based on unweighted final counts for the baseline survey, following data cleaning. Weighted results will differ.

sample to achieve sufficient statistical power (80% power) across lagged regression analysis. Power estimates were calculated under simple random sampling assumptions, providing conservative benchmarks for detecting effects of interest based on the planned sample size and assuming independent observations with no design

effects or clustering adjustments. This resulted in a target of approximately 4000 participants, informed by both feasibility considerations and sample size guidance for probability and non-probability samples. Given the range of outcomes and subgroup comparisons, we will conduct separate, analysis-specific power analysis calculations for

each planned study and pre-registration, as different analytical approaches require different assumptions and tests. Each pre-registration will specify the research questions, hypotheses, statistical models, variable operationalisations, measurement items and analytical strategy, thereby ensuring transparency and methodological rigour across all planned analyses.

Targeted sample size

In Wave 1, approximately 4121 parent–child dyads were recruited (the total sample size achieved for the baseline survey was $n=4121$ parent/child dyads ($n=8242$ individual respondents), slightly higher than the initial target of $n=4000$). Based on previous similar studies conducted by SRC, an attrition rate of ~50% is anticipated across all surveys. Therefore, the expected sample size for Wave 3 is between 1300 and 3000 dyads, for Wave 4 between 750 and 1000 dyads and for Wave 5 between 450 and 560 dyads. Wave 2 represents the only exception, since as previously noted, this wave consists of a subsample of roughly 1000 dyads from Wave 1 for a brief survey. This subsample will largely be drawn from the probability-based panel, given its greater population representativeness and the well-established engagement structures within this panel that will support higher participant retention over time, supplemented by one non-probability panel. This is to mitigate the risk of higher than anticipated rates of attrition, especially given the short intervals between baseline, Wave 2 and Wave 3.

Attrition analyses will be conducted by comparing retained and non-retained participants on all relevant baseline variables to assess whether dropout is systematic across waves. Any significant differences between groups will be reported. To handle missing data and reduce potential bias associated with attrition, we will use full information maximum likelihood (FIML) and inverse probability weights (IPWs), which retain all available data under the assumption that data are missing at random (MAR). FIML and IPW are widely recommended for longitudinal analyses and have been shown to provide valid and efficient estimates when missingness is appropriately modelled. Recent research also supports the use of FIML and IPW as a robust approach for handling attrition in follow-up studies.²⁶ Missing data will be handled using multiple imputation to reduce potential bias and maximise the use of available data. Imputation models will include all relevant study variables and auxiliary variables associated with missingness, with pooled estimates calculated across multiple imputed datasets.²⁷ Key recommendations for the use of multiple imputation in applied research will also be followed to improve the robustness and validity of estimates under assumptions of MAR.^{28 29}

Qualitative sampling

Participants for qualitative studies (in each round, $n=\text{min. } 20$ young people; $n=\text{min. } 20$ parents and caregivers) will be drawn from the broader longitudinal cohort, forming a nested sample. Following each relevant wave, selected

young people and parents and caregivers will be asked whether they agree to be contacted about qualitative research opportunities associated with that wave's evaluation activities. Direct informed consent for each qualitative activity will be obtained prior to participation. Accordingly, participants may take part in more than one qualitative activity throughout the duration of the study.

Analysis of survey data will be used to identify whether particular groups of young people and/or their parents and caregivers appear to experience the age restrictions differently. Where groups appear to experience more negative impacts, they will be prioritised for inclusion in qualitative studies (eg, sampling based on age, gender, disability, cultural background, geographic location or digital engagement patterns). Given this purposive sampling approach, we will not use the qualitative studies to make claims about the representativeness of different attitudes, impacts or other themes. Instead, it will be used to deepen our understanding of the experiences of young people and their parents and caregivers, complementing the quantitatively derived results.

Final sample sizes will be guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby subsequent interviews or group discussions will be added if sufficient depth and breadth of data have not been collected to address the qualitative evaluation questions. This is discussed further in the *Qualitative analysis* section.

Measurements

Survey measurements

Survey measures include self-reported sociodemographics, plus (1) young people's adherence to the SMMA legislation, (2) impact on young people's digital practices, (3) impact on young people's well-being and functioning, (4) impact on family dynamics and (5) impact on community attitudes and dynamics. A full overview of survey measures is presented on Open Science Framework (see https://osf.io/y3sd6/overview?view_only=9ff33ce753944639979476066ffa5769 for full survey measures).

The survey measures were selected through an interactive literature review process that involved all the authors identifying measures that have been previously used in the academic literature, policy evaluations and national surveys of youth digital experiences. The following measures were prioritised: (1) psychometrically validated measures, (2) developmentally appropriate measures and (3) measures previously used to assess young people's digital experiences in existing national datasets to facilitate more commensurable comparisons.³⁰ Some subscales or specific items were used to reduce survey length, with only items exhibiting the highest factor loadings selected for the questionnaires. Customised measures were generated when previously validated or existing measures were not available (eg, assessing perceptions of the SMMA) or were too long for inclusion in the survey. As SMMA is a world-first social media age-restriction, we developed bespoke measures of adherence. Young people and their

parents were asked to self-report their understanding of SMMA and their intention to adhere to or circumvent the age restrictions at Wave 1. In subsequent waves, young people reported the actual deactivation of age-restricted social media accounts and any circumvention by themselves or aided by parents and/or other family members.

To ensure the appropriateness of the survey measures for study participants, a set of authors reviewed the survey items for clarity, construct validity and developmental appropriateness. Then, other authors provided feedback on all survey materials, including phrasing, ordering, response options and validity.

To ensure the survey and instructional materials were developmentally appropriate and to support consistent interpretation and willingness to respond, members of eSafety's Research and Evaluation team conducted cognitive testing of the draft survey items with Australian parents and young people from the target population. This involved 75-min in-depth interviews with five parents/caregivers and 22 young people aged 10–16 years. A combination of observation methods and verbal probing techniques was used to investigate comprehension, retrieval, judgement and response processes.³¹ As it was not feasible to test the full survey instrument with every participant, individuals were assigned specific sections of the survey and a rotation system was implemented to ensure complete coverage across the sample.

Participants were recruited for cognitive testing through the research recruitment panel, Farron Research. Quotas were established to ensure diversity in demographic characteristics, including gender, age (with intentional weighting toward younger children), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, geographical location (with weighting toward relatively disadvantaged Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage postcode areas) and language background. Each participant received a \$90 gift card in recognition of their time and contribution. The results of the cognitive testing were used to inform the final wording, presentation and selection of the survey items, which included some adjustments to the wording and order of validated measures to facilitate participant understanding. Additionally, "Don't know" and "I don't want to say" were included as explicit response options for some scales. Our ethics protocol specified that we would provide young people with an option to refuse or skip a question. Providing "Don't know" and "I don't want to say" as standard response options was intended to reduce the likelihood that young people would feel pressured to provide an answer. By explicitly presenting these as options, we sought to support young people's comfort in declining to answer when they were unsure or unwilling to respond. Given children can be more susceptible to acquiescence bias (see ³²), we were concerned that, in the absence of clear non-response options, participants might feel pressured to provide a response.

The length of the survey was limited to approximately 20 min for both parents and young people, with

the exception of Wave 2, in line with recommendations from the SRC, based on their experience fielding similar surveys in Australia to avoid cognitively overburdening the participants. The survey was revised to meet these time constraints by the authors, following cognitive testing and pilot testing.

Qualitative measurement

In November 2025, members of eSafety's Research and Evaluation team conducted a pre-implementation study with 43 young people under the age of 16–29 parents and caregivers.²¹ The study engaged young people and parents and caregivers in qualitative interviews, focus groups and short online tasks to document young people's and parents' and caregivers' attitudes towards the SMMA legislation prior to the implementation of the age restrictions in Australia. The study explored young people's relationships with social media, perspectives and attitudes towards the SMMA legislation and the range of impacts young people and their parents and caregivers expected to result from its implementation.

The findings from the pre-implementation qualitative study were used to generate lines of inquiry to explore young people's and parents' lived experience of the SMMA, which complements the quantitative evaluation component and elaborates on the outcomes defined in the Theory of Change. These lines of inquiry constitute the evaluation questions to be explored through qualitative methods deployed in the longitudinal study (see online supplemental file 2 in the Appendix). The study team will use insights gathered in each survey wave to continue to define and refine the qualitative lines of inquiry. Insights from qualitative components will support robust interpretation of the quantitative findings. The study's qualitative objectives and approach are intended to complement the data derived through quantitative modes of enquiry by providing nuanced insights into young people's and their parents' and carers' lived experiences of SMMA implementation and associated intended and unintended impacts.

Passive smartphone sensing data

Young people who opt in to the passive sensing component and provide the required consent will be invited to download and install the Wakoopa app. Wakoopa is an application that can be downloaded to iPhone and Android devices that securely, passively and automatically collects information about digital media use. Once installed, the app runs quietly in the background and collects data on smartphone and social media use in a non-intrusive way for a specified duration. The following data will be collected: (1) the name of applications used, (2) the operating system of the device, (3) the date and time that an application is used (based on the participant device's local time) and (4) the duration of each application usage instance, measured in seconds. These objectively captured time measures will be used as indicators of the amount of time young people spend online and their

engagement with age-restricted platforms, providing some insight into the degree of adherence to the SMMA.

All data from Wakoopa will be collected and managed by the SRC. Data are linked to survey responses by a unique, anonymous identifier. No personal information or other content (such as photos, texts, emails, contacts, social media messages, URLs or phone calls or search history) will be collected by the app. Researchers will only have access to de-identified data that is aggregated at the individual level. The logged data from participants' smartphones will allow us to calculate how much time they are actually spending on specific social media apps (ie, Snapchat, Instagram), in addition to self-reported estimates of time spent on these platforms. This dual-measure approach enables us to assess the correspondence between subjective perceptions and objectively recorded behaviour, thereby providing insight into the accuracy and potential bias in self-reported social media use. In particular, we will examine whether systematic over- or underestimation of use is associated with key participant characteristics or outcomes of interest, which may indicate differences in awareness, recall ability or social desirability bias.

Administrative data

With informed participant consent, young people's MBS, PBS and NAPLAN records will be linked to their survey responses. To support the successful integration and analysis of these diverse data sources, we will engage the Data Linkage and Integration Authority at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), an Accredited Data Service Provider, to provide expert guidance on linkage protocols and data governance.

MBS records will be used to provide a deeper understanding of young people's health and mental health service utilisation and how this may change following the SMMA. These records include information on service use and hospital-based care, referral pathways, geographic access and potential location-based disparities, as well as financial aspects of service access (eg, out-of-pocket costs). Similarly, PBS records will be used to provide a deeper understanding of young people's health and mental health and any changes over time. These records include information on medication use and treatment adherence and patterns (eg, first-time vs repeat prescriptions).

NAPLAN records will be used to assess educational achievement. NAPLAN is a national standardised assessment administered annually to Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. NAPLAN measures students' proficiency across four domains: reading, writing, conventions of language and numeracy.

In addition to linked participant data, we propose incorporating analysis of non-linked, de-identified population-level datasets into the evaluation where feasible. These datasets may include health and educational data, as described above. The evaluation may also draw on relevant eSafety-held datasets, such as reporting data on specific online harms (eg, cyberbullying) from eSafety's

complaint-based schemes, enquiries data (eg, the Social Media Minimum Age form), aggregate insights gathered from eSafety's compliance or transparency activities, and data on uptake of eSafety's educational resources and support related to the SMMA. These data are expected to provide valuable insights to inform young people's adherence to SMMA and changes in digital practices within a broader population context.

Data analysis

Here we present our general approach to evaluating the SMMA across the study aims. To reduce analytical flexibility and enhance transparency, we plan to preregister analysis plans prior to examining outcome data. To address this, we will implement a structured pre-registration strategy where feasible and appropriate. Specifically, we will preregister analysis plans for individual studies or reports prior to accessing data and conducting the corresponding analyses, particularly for quantitative components and other analyses where pre-specification is standard practice. These pre-registrations will be uploaded to the Open Science Framework and, where applicable, linked to the present protocol to enhance transparency and traceability. We note, however, that not all outputs derived from the dataset, such as exploratory analyses, qualitative papers or ancillary contributions by collaborating researchers, may be suitable for pre-registration due to their iterative or emergent nature, and thus flexibility will be maintained in these cases. While the protocol provides a comprehensive overview of the study design, data collection and overarching research aims, we acknowledge that specific analytical decisions will necessarily vary across individual research questions and sub-studies within this large-scale, multi-wave project. These pre-registrations will be made publicly available and linked to this protocol to ensure traceability. Each pre-registration will include (a) clearly specified research questions, aligned with the broader aims of the project (ie, our five core thematic 'buckets' and the most policy-relevant questions), (b) definitions of key outcome variables, (c) detailed model specifications, including the selection of covariates and control variables and (d) planned robustness and sensitivity analyses where applicable. This approach enables analytical specificity while constraining post hoc decision-making. Furthermore, pre-registrations will explicitly distinguish confirmatory from exploratory analyses, and any deviations from planned procedures will be transparently reported and justified. Where appropriate, analysis code and variable specifications will also be shared following publication.

Descriptive analyses

We will conduct descriptive analyses examining frequencies, average values, percentages, factor analysis and reliability of scales for each survey wave. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarise the main characteristics of the samples and study variables. For categorical variables, we will calculate frequencies and percentages. For continuous

variables, we will report means, SD and ranges. Where relevant, distributions will be visualised using bar charts and histograms to illustrate the prevalence and variability of responses. These descriptive analyses will provide an overview of the dataset and inform subsequent inferential analyses. Composite scores will be calculated in line with the scoring instructions of validated scales, whenever possible (see Open Science Framework project website).

Inferential analyses

In the first phase of data analysis, we will focus on over-time analysis of main study domains captured by parent-child dyadic surveys. Following the approach suggested in Craig *et al*,³³ various analytical approaches (eg, multi-level modelling, random-intercept cross-lagged panel model) may be used to understand both between-person and within-person changes pre- and post-implementation of the SMMA.

For causal inference analyses, we will employ TMLE as our primary strategy to evaluate the effect of adherence to the SMMA on key outcomes, such as psychosocial well-being and functioning^{34 35} (introductions to TMLE). TMLE is a doubly robust approach that combines outcome modelling and propensity score estimation and can incorporate machine learning methods to reduce reliance on parametric assumptions. This makes it particularly well-suited to the observational, quasi-experimental nature of the present study and it has been increasingly applied in social science research to evaluate the effects of policy-level interventions.³⁶ The specific target parameters, confounder sets and implementation details will be specified in the relevant pre-registrations prior to analysis. To assess the robustness of causal estimates, we will also conduct sensitivity analyses that vary the operationalisation of adherence, for example, comparing binary and graded operationalisations (eg, no adherence vs partial adherence vs full adherence). We will additionally conduct pre-specified heterogeneity analyses to examine whether effects differ across subgroups of substantive interest, including age group, gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status and LGBTQ+identity.

In the second phase, after all modes of data collection are completed, we will integrate and triangulate data across our methods, including multi-wave survey responses, smartphone passive tracking data, administrative data and qualitative data to assess the potential long-term positive and negative outcomes of the SMMA implementation.

External time-varying factors—such as seasonal effects, school holidays, child and adolescent mental health initiatives and other concurrent societal or policy changes—may influence study outcomes independently of the SMMA policy. These potential confounders are explicitly accounted for within the five-wave panel design. While recruitment periods are intended to primarily align with the school term, it is possible that some data collection may occur during holiday periods. Accordingly, parents are asked to indicate whether their child is on school holidays

at the time of survey completion. Relevant contextual events occurring during the study period, including any major new investments or changes in child and adolescent mental health services, will be systematically monitored, documented and, where feasible, incorporated into the analyses through wave-specific time indicators and additional contextual covariates. A post-hoc sensitivity analysis is also planned whereby school term time and holiday periods are mapped within each wave and compared, given that screen use and sleep habits are known to vary during holidays^{37 38}; this will allow for the examination of potential differences both within and across waves. The repeated-measures structure further enables the examination of within-person changes over time, facilitating the distinction between policy-related effects and broader temporal trends. Time will be modelled explicitly across all five waves to estimate trajectories while adjusting for observed time-varying contextual influences.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative component of the evaluation draws on two complementary forms of data: (1) open-ended survey responses and (2) in-depth qualitative studies, including focus groups, interviews and pre- and post-tasks. Analysis approaches for both components are described below.

Open-ended survey responses

The coding of open-ended survey responses will follow an iterative process, including (1) familiarisation, (2) code-frame development and (3) coding, as described below. Analysis of open-ended survey responses will begin with familiarisation, with multiple researchers reviewing a random sample of 10% of responses to understand the breadth and variation in participants' perspectives. Each researcher will individually note the key themes observed, and then the team will discuss and collaboratively develop a grid of draft broad themes. Following the familiarisation stage, a minimum of two researchers will each independently develop an initial code-frame. Code-frames will be developed using a combination of deductive codes drawn from the research questions and inductive codes, drawing on the grid of draft themes developed through the familiarisation process. The initial code-frame, definitions and structure will then be reviewed and refined through team discussions. To validate and finalise the code-frame, we will undertake a pilot coding phase where the two researchers will independently code the same subset of a minimum of 100 randomly selected responses and then jointly refine the code-frame until they are satisfied with the level of intercoder reliability. Software with coding functionality (such as Q or NVivo) will be used to support this process. The remaining responses will then be coded within the coding software using the agreed code-frame. As noted by Campbell *et al*,³⁹ at least two coders are required for developing the codeframe and conducting the pilot test. However, coding the remaining responses only requires one knowledgeable coder. To ensure consistency and correct application of codes, a

second coder will review a subset of the coded data at regular intervals throughout the coding process. After each set of 200 responses is coded, the second coder will code a random selection of 10% of responses to ensure consistency. Throughout the coding process, the team will hold discussions at regular intervals to resolve uncertainties, validate interpretations, and ensure shared understanding of coding decisions. This will be logged and noted within the coding software to avoid ongoing misinterpretation. For questions where structured comparison is appropriate, such as comparing the proportion of participants who expressed specific attitudes or impacts, the above approach will be applied. However, for open-ended questions that are highly exploratory or which are not designed to be quantified, a descriptive, thematic approach will be used to analyse responses. Analysis will identify key themes, narratives and illustrative examples rather than assigning codes to each response and calculating proportions. These findings will be used to enhance understanding of the main themes raised, not to make claims about representativeness.

In-depth qualitative studies

Qualitative data will be drawn from the focus groups, interviews, and pre- and post-tasks and will be analysed after each qualitative study using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke.^{40 41} Analysis will deploy a qualitative analysis tool, such as NVivo,⁴² to support systematic coding and theme development. It will be an iterative analysis and coding process, where the codeframe will be refined throughout fieldwork. Following the same process as the development of the code-frame for the open-ended survey responses outlined above, an initial code-frame will combine deductive codes drawn from the research questions and inductive codes generated through preliminary analysis of the responses. At regular intervals throughout fieldwork, the researchers will discuss the key themes and continue to iterate the code-frame. This will include the co-investigators who facilitated and observed the sessions and the youth co-researchers for the groups that they co-facilitated. Once all pre- and post-tasks have been collected, a minimum of two researchers will review these responses and meet to discuss key themes and iterate the code-frame. Once each qualitative study is completed and the research team is aligned on the code-frame, the focus group and interview transcripts and pre- and post-task responses will be uploaded to the qualitative analysis tool. To validate the code-frame, we will undertake a pilot coding phase where a minimum of two researchers will independently code the same subset of responses (minimum of two transcripts). The researchers will then meet to compare the interpretations, align the coding approaches, and refine the code-frame as needed. The remaining transcripts will then be coded using the agreed code-frame. Throughout the process, the team will hold discussions to resolve uncertainties and interrogate and validate interpretations. Following coding, the researchers will meet to discuss

whether sufficient data saturation has been reached in terms of the range of responses from participants. In determining this, depth of insight (rather than breadth of responses) will be prioritised given the purpose of the qualitative research, which is to deepen understanding of the lived experiences of young people and their parents and caregivers. In line with this, sampling will prioritise those who have experienced the age restrictions differently, and therefore reaching full thematic saturation is not essential. As identified by Gandy,⁴³ rich qualitative insight for these purposes can be achieved with relatively small sample sizes. Once the researchers feel they have captured enough depth to answer the qualitative evaluation questions, they will continue in their analysis and develop a summary narrative of the qualitative findings. Additional focus groups and interviews, or follow-up questioning with prior participants, will be conducted if needed to ensure sufficient depth of insight. Following the development of the initial narrative summary of findings, we will conduct a collective sense-making workshop with researchers and youth co-researchers to support interpretation of the findings and ensure analysis generates actionable insights. Involving young researchers in this process is intended to enhance the quality of the analysis by bringing fresh perspectives that may challenge the assumptions of older researchers and lead to new insights and more nuanced interpretation.⁴⁴

Data integration

The evaluation adopts a multiphase mixed-methods design⁴⁵ comprising iterative qualitative and quantitative studies addressing complementary research questions. Findings from each phase will inform the development of subsequent lines of inquiry, enabling progressive refinement of hypotheses and data collection tools, to support an integrated, nuanced assessment of the implementation and impacts of the SMMA legislation.

After analysing the quantitatively (eg, surveys, passive smartphone tracking) and qualitatively (eg, interviews, focus groups) derived data separately as per the above methods, the insights will be systematically integrated to strengthen the validity of evaluative conclusions. This process is intended to enable richer insights by revealing complementary, unexpected or conflicting patterns, which can generate new questions, hypotheses or perspectives to explore. The evaluation spans a wide range of questions, data sources, outcomes and stakeholder groups, which necessitates a structured and transparent approach to integrating findings. To support this, an integration framework will be developed to map how different data sources contribute to answering each evaluation question.

Patient and public involvement

Throughout the duration of the study, eSafety is facilitating an embedded participatory research approach to promote youth representation and engagement in the evaluation process. Select members of the eSafety Youth

Council, who are Australian young people, will serve as peer researchers on the project. All participating peer researchers have voluntarily opted in to being part of the research team and are remunerated for their time and contributions. In line with a youth-rights approach to this project, the involvement of youth researchers gives young people a role in shaping the study. Young people's involvement as youth peer researchers will ensure that the research activities and deliverables are age-appropriate so that participants are empowered to communicate their perspectives and experiences and that findings are a genuine reflection of these.

Peer researchers are trained and mentored in safe and ethical research practices and work alongside the eSafety researchers. They will support and contribute to various research activities, including co-designing and executing participant engagement strategies, co-designing and co-facilitating qualitative research activities (as described in section 4.1.3) and participating in the interpretation and dissemination of qualitative and quantitative data (eg, through co-facilitation of webinars or collaborating on the preparation of youth-focused written summaries of findings). Their engagement is intended to enrich analysis and support interpretation that is grounded in young people's lived experiences and social contexts. Additionally, their involvement as co-facilitators of qualitative research activities is anticipated to foster greater comfort and openness among young participants by supporting rapport building and helping to mitigate the power dynamics between researchers and participants.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Ethics and consent

The study has been designed by eSafety evaluators and academic experts (lead academic partner and AAG) with significant experience conducting research on sensitive and stigmatised issues with young people. This expertise includes the design of methods to mitigate risks, carefully manage duty of care and increase participant comfort and engagement. The study protocols and materials have also been reviewed by Indigenous collaborators to ensure cultural safety. The study received ethical approval from the AIFS Human Research Ethics Committee (application approval number 2025/06) and complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research.

All participants provided informed consent at the beginning of the baseline survey and each subsequent survey. A comprehensive assessment of potential risks and corresponding mitigation strategies was undertaken, including risks related to participant discomfort, privacy and confidentiality, data security and the handling of sensitive disclosures. Safeguards include, but are not limited to, robust informed consent procedures, the option to skip questions or withdraw at any time, secure

data storage practices, de-identification of responses and referral procedures where appropriate.

Data management

Data collected as part of this evaluation will be stored in a de-identified format and on secure servers with access restricted to named researchers. All research data will be retained for a minimum of 20 years after completion of this study before destruction in accordance with National Archives requirements. Our approach to data management and participant privacy protection is grounded in strict compliance with the Australian Privacy Principles and eSafety's other legislative obligations under the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth), the *Online Safety Act 2021* (Cth), the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (Cth) and the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (Cth). eSafety only uses or discloses personal information for the purpose for which it was collected or in other permitted circumstances, such as where consent is given for it to be used or disclosed for another purpose. eSafety will not disclose sensitive information about a person unless they agree or in other limited circumstances, such as when eSafety is required or authorised by law. Personal information will only be collected from participants who provide consent to enable data linkage. Personal data will be stored separately by SRC and linked only to the survey responses via a unique identifier. Researchers will not access or store personal information of participants.

Dissemination of findings

The findings of the study will be disseminated through multiple channels, including peer-reviewed academic journals, conference presentations, project websites (including eSafety.gov.au) and professional and public-facing websites and platforms. In addition, results will be shared through targeted stakeholder engagement activities, such as briefings, presentations or workshops, where appropriate. Findings from this evaluation will contribute empirical evidence to international debates; inform other countries considering similar age-based regulation of social media and inform national policy oversight and implementation in Australia. This study will be one of several potential data sources to support an independent legislative review process, which is to be led by the Australian Government's Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts (DITRDCSA). This review will occur 2 years after the effective commencement of the SMMA obligation to assess whether the legislation achieved its intended purpose and whether adjustments may need to be made to be proportional to changed behaviours of social media platforms and young people.

Governance and independence

The evaluation is funded by the eSafety Commissioner and led by eSafety's Research and Evaluation team, in partnership with Stanford University's Social Media Lab and an independent AAG comprising international experts

(read the AAG Consensus Statement here). Recognising eSafety's dual role as regulator and evaluation lead, several safeguards have been put in place to protect the independence and integrity of the evaluation. First, the lead academic partner and AAG have a formal role in shaping the study design, analysis and interpretation of findings, supported by memoranda of understanding and agreements that guarantee academic independence and the right to publish results irrespective of outcomes, subject only to review for factual accuracy and confidentiality. Further, de-identified data are accessible to all listed academic co-investigators under ethics approval and formal data-sharing agreements, enabling independent interrogation across disciplines. While data are not publicly released due to legal and ethical constraints, a controlled-access model supports rigorous scrutiny.

A structured conflict-of-interest management process is in place for the evaluation to ensure transparency and integrity of the evaluation process. This involves annual declarations of conflicts from AAG members, ongoing disclosures and systematic review of any potential conflicts. Identified risks are formally assessed, monitored and mitigated through documented controls, governance oversight and regular review cycles.

It should also be noted that eSafety's research and evaluation function sits in a distinct organisational division within eSafety and reports to a separate general manager from those areas responsible for regulatory, operational or enforcement functions. All eSafety staff are APS employees who are appointed under the *Public Service Act 1999* (Cth) and are bound by the APS Values and Code of Conduct. They are not political appointees.

Study status

Recruitment and data collection periods for each study wave are presented in [table 1](#). Data collection for the study is currently on track according to the timeline outlined in [table 1](#).

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Competing interests KC, BK, MN, IH and TT are employees of the eSafety Commissioner. JR declares that Orygen received payment in 2024 to produce a report on improving self-injury content moderation practices for a platform, delivered in 2025; and that she was a member of Meta's self-injury advisory group from 2018 to 2025. AT declares the following: Western Sydney University (WSU) was awarded research grants for which she served as lead chief investigator, funded by TikTok (project on dangerous challenges and online hoaxes), Meta (intergenerational online safety perspectives), Google Australia (Centre of Excellence Seed Funding), Google USA/YouTube (three projects on youth participatory research, young people's wellbeing and digital content and youth digital content creation cultures), Google LLC (Age Appropriate Content Framework, Ireland), the Tech Coalition Safe Online Research Fund (Youth Voices on AI), the International Telecommunications Union (Child Online Protection Initiative) and the Office of the eSafety Commissioner (In Real Life: Digital ethics and participation, reimagined by and for young people). Payments were also made to WSU by Snap, Meta and Google Kids and Families in an advisory capacity. AT has served on the International Telecommunications Union Online Safety Advisory Board, the Meta Advisory for the Pacific Strategy, the YouTube Children and Family Advisory and the eSafety Online Safety Advisory (unpaid). JH declares receipt of consulting fees from Google/YouTube. SXL declares receipt of consulting fees from the Microsoft AI Ethics Group and membership of the YouTube Youth and Families Advisory Board. BC declares unpaid membership of the eSafety Online Safety Advisory and has worked as a paid consultant on several eSafety research reports. All other authors have no competing interests.

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