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Article

Digital Well-Being after Australia's Social Media Age Law: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: The Social Media Minimum-Age Law in Australia mandates that age-restricted social media platforms take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 years of age from creating or maintaining accounts, but there is limited knowledge about adolescents' early social and psychological adaptation to restricted-platform access. The present study explored the relationships between restricted-platform access, account loss or retention, reported attempts to circumvent restrictions, parental mediation, and psychological outcomes among Australian adolescents. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used. The quantitative component consisted of 624 adolescents aged 13-15 years who were selected using quota sampling (non-probability sampling). Account loss or restricted access was associated with higher loneliness ($\beta = .13$, $p = .008$) and lower life satisfaction ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .021$), but was not significantly associated with anxiety or psychological well-being. Lower psychological well-being, higher anxiety, higher loneliness, and lower life satisfaction were reported with circumvention attempts. The odds of reported circumvention attempts were lower with active parental mediation and higher with restrictive parental mediation. Active mediation also moderated the association between account loss and psychological well-being. Interview accounts indicated that some adolescents experienced a decrease in online pressure with account restriction, while others felt excluded and experienced an increase in perceived exclusion. The reactions of adolescents to age restrictions on social media were thus varied. Beyond account restriction, policy evaluation should also include peer inclusion, alternative communication and supportive parental mediation.

Keywords: *Adolescent digital well-being; social media minimum-age law, account access, circumvention attempts, parental mediation, psychological outcomes*

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Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of the social life of adolescents. Digital platforms offer youth opportunities to connect with peers, find information, explore identity, engage in community and access social support. Meanwhile, teens can experience cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, social comparison, unwanted contact, sleep disruption, and pressures from constant connectivity (Alim, 2017; boyd, 2014; Best et al., 2014; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Agatston et al., 21012). As a result, adolescent digital well-being has emerged as a key research and policy priority for researchers, families, educators, public health professionals, technology companies, and policymakers.

The connection between social media and adolescent mental health is not clear. Other research has found links between specific social media use and negative effects, such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and lower life satisfaction (Twenge et al., 2018; Vannucci et al., 2017; Alhrahsheh & Almajali, 2023). But other research has identified small, varied, and highly context-dependent relationships between digital technology use and adolescent well-being, which are heavily influenced by individual characteristics, patterns of use, social context, and the type of online experiences (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022). This evidence indicates that social media should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all solution, or as a one-size-fits-all problem. Instead, its implications will probably be contingent on how, why, and in what social contexts adolescents interact with digital platforms. These discussions have increasingly shaped digital-governance efforts aimed at enhancing children's online safety. Age assurance, platform accountability, restrictions on targeted advertising, and requirements to reduce exposure to harmful content are among the measures governments and regulators have been thinking about.

Digital platforms can also offer some youth socially meaningful environments, such as communication, social connection, and technology-mediated support. For instance, a study on virtual-reality socialisation groups on Facebook examined their feasibility as a supportive intervention for children with social anxiety, but the results of this study cannot be directly applied to adolescents impacted by the minimum-age social media law in Australia (Alsrehan et al., 2024).

The Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 introduced Australia’s social media minimum-age restrictions. Since 10 December 2025, age-restricted social media platforms have been required to consider reasonable steps to stop Australians under 16 years of age from establishing

or preserving accounts. The legal requirement is not on the shoulders of adolescents or parents, but on the shoulders of platforms and the design of digital services. Australia's policy intervention provides a significant new lens through which to explore the adaptation of adolescents to digital regulation. Age-based account restrictions are supported by the idea that they can help limit exposure to harmful online content, cyberbullying, addictive design elements, and social comparison pressures. However, critics question the issue of social exclusion, less participation in peer culture, restricted access to information and support, privacy issues with age-assurance systems, and the possibility for adolescents to find alternative ways to participate digitally.

The conflicting arguments suggest that the psychological effects of minimum-age restrictions are not known beforehand. The initial impact of the policy is significant as account restriction can have a different impact on adolescents. Limited access to certain platforms could be linked to less exposure to upsetting online experiences, more time for offline experiences, or better psychological detachment for some youth. Loss of accounts or limited access can be linked to feelings of being cut out of peer communication, loss of autonomy, disruption of social routines, or heightened desire to find alternative ways to connect for others. Parental mediation, peer norms, access to digital devices at home, previous social media usage, and offline and online alternatives may also influence adolescents' experiences. There is a considerable amount of existing research on adolescent social media use, problematic digital engagement, parental mediation, and psychological well-being. However, it offers little direct evidence of adaptation when access to accounts is limited as part of a national legal requirement. Specifically, little is known about the relationships between restricted-platform account access, reported attempts to circumvent the policy, parental mediation, and psychological outcomes during the early implementation of a minimum-age policy. It is not surprising that there is little evidence as Australia's law has only recently begun and is still in the process of being formally evaluated.

The current study aims to fill this gap in the evidence by investigating the relationships between restricted-platform access, account retention or loss, reported attempts to circumvent the restrictions, parental mediation, and psychological outcomes among Australian adolescents. The quantitative component will employ an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to discover patterns of association between psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction. The qualitative phase will then examine the meaning that adolescents give to the restrictions on their accounts, to their interactions with peers, to their reactions from family members, to how they adapt to these restrictions,

and to the social and psychological implications of these restrictions. The study has three contributions. First, it moves the focus away from the general discussion of positive and negative effects of social media and focuses on how adolescents respond to formal access restrictions on social media accounts. Second, it differentiates between access to the account, retention or loss of the account, and reported attempts to circumvent the account, as opposed to simply legal compliance or non-compliance. Third, it explores parental mediation as a potentially significant contextual factor that could impact on adolescents' digital adaptation and psychological experiences. The study aims to offer early, policy-relevant evidence of adolescent digital well-being after the introduction of Australia's Social Media Minimum-Age Law, in this way.

Literature Review

Adolescent Social Media Use and Digital Well-Being

Social media plays an important but very different part in the lives of adolescents. It can facilitate communication, self-awareness, peer affiliation, creative expression and information and social support. It can also be a source of cyberbullying, unwanted contact, harmful content, social comparison, and pressures of being constantly visible and responsive (Best et al., 2014; boyd, 2014; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Digital well-being should not be viewed merely as the absence of excessive screen time or psychological distress. It's about the ability of adolescents to use digital technologies in ways that promote autonomy, social connection, emotional functioning and daily functioning. Recent studies have challenged the notion that social media has a consistent impact on youth. Rather, results seem to be influenced by the characteristics of the adolescent, the nature and function of platform use, the quality of online interactions, and the broader family and peer environment (Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

This is particularly important for policy research. Limiting access to specific social media accounts could help limit exposure to certain online risks for some adolescents. However, the same limitation can also interfere with others' ability to communicate with peers, join online communities, receive support, or express themselves in terms of identity. Therefore, the impact of the minimum age policy needs to be studied empirically, not based on general evidence of social media usage.

Social Media and Mental Health

Research on social media and adolescent mental health is still inconclusive. Others have found links between increased social media use and anxiety, loneliness, decreased life satisfaction, and worse psychological health (Twenge et al., 2018; Vannucci et al., 2017). These may be social comparison, fear of missing out, cyberbullying, sleep disturbance, exposure to idealized content and replacement of restorative offline activities.

The average effects reported in population-level studies, however, are typically small, and they mask important differences among adolescents. Recent studies have demonstrated that there can be positive, negative, or neutral effects on different people depending on their social media usage. There are different types of use, such as active, supportive, and relationship-oriented, which can differ from passive browsing, conflictual interaction, and compulsive engagement (Beyens et al., 2024; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

A cross-sectional relationship between social networking addiction and academic performance has been reported among university students in the United Arab Emirates, but the population and outcome are not significantly similar to the present study (Alhrahsheh & Almajali, 2023).

For this reason, this study does not consider social media access as a good or bad thing. Rather, it looks at the relationship between limited-platform access to accounts, account loss or retention, and reported circumvention attempts and psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction in the early stages of policy implementation.

Digital Governance and Australia's Social Media Minimum-Age Law

The voluntary policies and guidelines of platforms are increasingly being complemented by regulatory measures aimed at enhancing children's online safety. These include age assurance, privacy safeguards, limiting harmful design features, and increased accountability for digital-service providers. Australia's Social Media Minimum-Age Law is a major shift in this policy context as it holds the platforms responsible for ensuring that Australians under 16 cannot create or have accounts.

The policy provides a unique research environment. It can impact adolescents' access to peer networks, platform-based communication and digital communities, in a nationwide legal obligation, unlike ordinary parental rules or school-based restrictions. The implications are likely to vary based on whether the policy results in adolescents having access to accounts, losing access to accounts, changing to other services, or feeling the policy is fair, protective, intrusive, or socially exclusionary.

The policy shouldn't be judged on the basis of whether under-16 users can still be seen on specific platforms. Its wider implications relate to the psychological and social adjustment of the adolescents to the restrictions, the reactions of the families, and the development of alternative ways of participating online or offline. These questions are particularly relevant as the policy is new and the potential impacts of the policy and unintended consequences are unknown.

2.4 Restricted-Platform Account Access and Reported Circumvention Attempts:

Bans on digital access do not necessarily generate consistent behavioural reactions. Adolescents may take the loss of their accounts, ask for help from their parents, engage more in offline activities, switch to other digital platforms, or try to keep their accounts in some other way. These varying reactions could be due to differences in peer dependency, sense of social exclusion, digital competence, family communication, and the role of certain platforms in social life.

Compensatory Internet Use Theory is relevant because it suggests that online use can be used to fulfil unmet social, emotional and psychological needs (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). In this context, reported circumvention attempts could be an attempt to maintain social connection, access peer culture, maintain identity expression, or minimize feelings of exclusion. These attempts should not be taken as a sign of deviant or psychologically damaging behaviour. Their implications can vary depending on the motives, the quality of the adolescents' offline relationships, and the availability of supportive alternatives.

This is significant for the present study. The study does not distinguish between compliant and non-compliant adolescents, but between restricted-platform access, account retention or loss and reported circumvention attempts. This is more in line with the legal framework of the Australian policy and does not place adolescents as the primary focus of legal responsibility.

Parental Mediation and Adaptation to Digital Restriction

Parental mediation is an important factor in adolescent digital behaviour. It usually involves active mediation, restrictive mediation and parental monitoring. Active mediation is a process of conversation, explanation and joint reflection on online activities. Restrictive mediation is mediation that has rules and limits to access or use. Monitoring is the awareness and/or supervision of parents over adolescents' digital behaviour (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

Parental mediation is not likely to have a consistent impact. Encouraging and talking down strategies can help adolescents recognize limitations, deal with frustration, find other ways to connect socially and ask for help when needed. In contrast, more strict or punitive strategies are linked to secrecy,

conflict, or increased motivation to access without parents' awareness. These options need to be considered, not assumed, especially where there are legal limitations and existing family rules and peer expectations.

There is a wealth of existing research that can inform the use of social media, adolescent well-being, and parental mediation. However, little is known about these processes in the context of access to accounts being limited by a nationwide minimum age law. Specifically, there is limited research on the relationship between account access, account loss or retention, reported circumvention attempts, and adolescents' psychological outcomes, as well as the relationship between various types of parental mediation and adolescents' psychological outcomes. The present study aims to fill this gap by using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to quantify these associations and qualitatively explore adolescents' experience and interpretation.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the theories of Self-Determination Theory, Compensatory Internet Use Theory and Displacement Hypothesis to explain the early adaptation of adolescents to the Social Media Minimum-Age Law in Australia. Psychological outcomes can differ based on account access or loss, report of circumvention attempts, parental mediation, and social context.

Self-Determination Theory suggests that autonomy, competence and relatedness are key factors in well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Restrictions on accounts can help to alleviate negative pressures for some youth and hinder connection and participation for others. In this study, SDT is not tested as a mediation model, but rather as an interpretive framework.

Compensatory Internet Use Theory

Compensatory Internet Use Theory suggests that people might use online spaces to fulfil unmet psychological, emotional or social needs (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Adolescents may thus turn to other forms of digital participation or to continued digital participation when their communication with peers, access to social support, identity expression, entertainment, or information is restricted.

In this context, it is important to note that reported attempts to circumvent should not be equated with deviance or poor adjustment. These attempts can be a way of holding on to important relationships or maintaining access to social places that are important to adolescents. Meanwhile, they can be linked to family conflict, anxiety, peer pressure, or ongoing fears of being excluded. The study thus focuses on

the reported circumvention attempts as an associational predictor of psychological outcomes, rather than on the positive or negative impact of circumvention attempts.

Displacement Hypothesis

The Displacement Hypothesis suggests that the time spent with digital media could be time that would have been spent on other activities, such as interacting with people, sleeping, studying, physical activity, or other restorative activities. But this explanation is only relevant if something is displaced, and whether online activity replaces or complements meaningful social connection.

Some adolescents might be more likely to engage in offline activities if they have to log in to an account on a restricted platform. On the other hand, lower peer connection can be linked to increased risk of account loss, as friend groups are dependent on age-restricted platforms for daily communication. The framework thus acknowledges the potential for displacement and stimulation. Limited access can provide opportunities for positive offline interaction, but can also hinder meaningful digital interaction.

Conceptual Model

Restricted-platform account access and reported circumvention attempts are the key predictors in the conceptual model. Parental mediation is explored as a predictor and moderator, specifically active mediation, restrictive mediation and monitoring. The outcomes are psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction. Analyses are adjusted for demographic and digital-context factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, prior and peer social media use, household digital access, and time since social media account was restricted.

The social patterning of digital access has been previously discussed and digital access has been suggested as a potential health-related inequality among adolescents and their household digital access and socioeconomic context (Alhrahsheh & Ivanova, 2022).

Proposed Relationships

The model explores the relationship between restricted-platform account access, account loss or retention, reported circumvention attempts, and psychological outcomes. Parental mediation is conceptualized as a predictor of account-related adaptation and a moderator of the relationship between account loss/limited access and psychological well-being. These are association, not cause-and-effect, relationships. The proposed patterns are tested through quantitative analyses, and qualitative interviews explain the experience of adolescents with peer connection, parental support and digital adaptation.

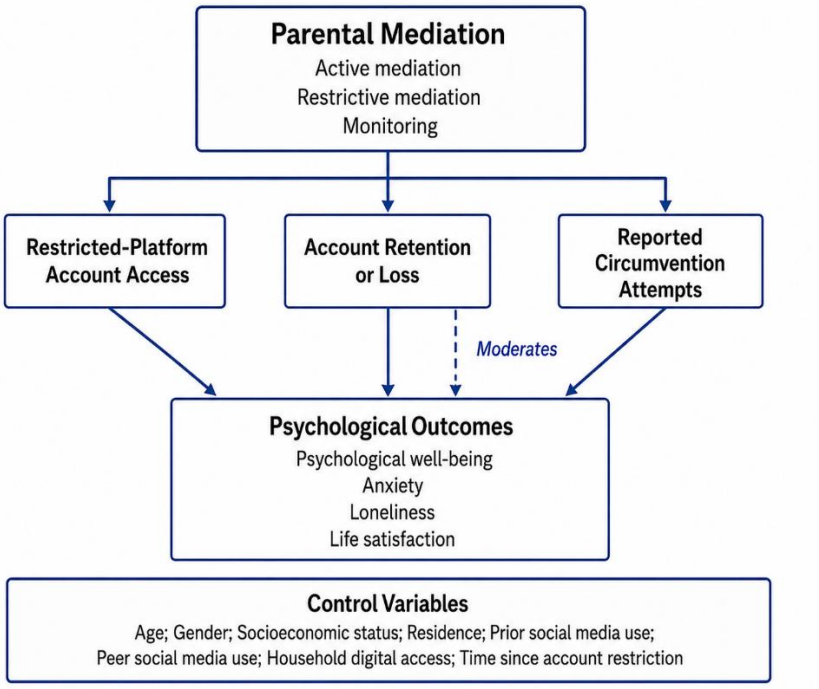


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model

The current study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to explore adolescents' adaptation to the Social Media Minimum-Age Law in Australia, as a solution to the identified research gap. The quantitative phase investigated the relationships between restricted-platform access, reported attempts to circumvent restrictions, parental mediation, and psychological outcomes, whereas the qualitative phase aimed to gain deeper insights into adolescents' lived experiences and perceptions of the changes. Based on the study objectives and theory, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated.

Questions

Q1. How do Australian adolescents describe their experiences of restricted-platform account access, account loss, or account retention following implementation of Australia's minimum-age restrictions?

Q2. What personal, family, peer, and platform-related factors shape adolescents' decisions to retain account access or attempt to circumvent account restrictions?

Q3. What perceived benefits, challenges, and unintended social or psychological consequences do adolescents report following implementation of the law?

Hypotheses

H1. Compared with adolescents who retained access to at least one account on an age-restricted social media platform, adolescents who reported account loss, blocked access, or inability to create an account were associated with differences in psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction.

H2. Reported circumvention attempts were associated with psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction after adjustment for age, gender, socioeconomic status, prior social media use, peer social media use, household digital access, and parental mediation.

H3a. Active parental mediation, restrictive parental mediation, and parental monitoring were differentially associated with reported circumvention attempts among Australian adolescents.

H3b. Active parental mediation moderated the association between account loss or restricted access and psychological well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was employed. First, quantitative data were analysed to explore associations between restricted-platform account access, account loss or retention, reported circumvention attempts, parental mediation, and psychological outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to help explain and contextualise the quantitative patterns in the family, peer and daily digital environments of adolescents. The study was associational, and results were interpreted as initial adaptation patterns after the law was implemented, but not as causal effects of the law on adolescent mental health.

Participants and Sampling

The participants were Australian adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 years who lived in Australia and gave informed assent and parent/guardian consent. To achieve diversity by age, gender, socioeconomic status and metropolitan, regional and rural residence, a quota-based non-probability sampling strategy was employed. Recruitment was done via schools, youth organisations, community networks and approved online sources.

The quantitative sample included 624 adolescents (51.4% female, 46.2% male, 2.4% non-binary or did not specify). A purposive subsample of 21 adolescents was selected to represent variation in account access, account loss or retention, reported circumvention attempts, parental mediation, gender, location,

and psychological outcomes for semi-structured interviews. The characteristics of the participants and the limited-platform accounts are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics and Restricted-Platform Account Status (N = 624)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	321	51.4
Male	288	46.2
Non-binary/prefer not to disclose	15	2.4
Age group		
13 years	191	30.6
14 years	243	38.9
15 years	190	30.4
Restricted-platform account status		
Retained access to at least one account	287	46.0
Account loss, blocked access, or inability to create an account	221	35.4
No recent use of age-restricted social media platforms	116	18.6
Reported circumvention attempts		
Yes	172	27.6
No	452	72.4

Measures

The World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5) is a short instrument that measures positive emotional functioning and vitality that was used to assess psychological well-being. The WHO-5 has been shown to have good psychometric properties in various populations and has been successfully applied to adolescent populations (de Wit et al., 2007; Topp et al., 2015).

The Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006) was used to assess anxiety symptoms. A validated short form loneliness measure was used to assess loneliness, which has been chosen for its suitability for adolescents. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was used to assess life satisfaction.

Access to restricted-platform accounts was evaluated based on the age-restricted social media platforms that were part of the scope of the study. Participants indicated if they had kept an account, lost access to an existing account, could not get an account, or did not use any platform in the study period recently. Restricted-platform account access was evaluated using self-report questions regarding the presence of an account, loss of an account, inability to create an account, and other reports of access to an age-

restricted platform. The survey did not request account names, passwords, technical methods, or other details that could facilitate circumvention., passwords, technical methods or detailed information that might help to circumvent. In this study, age-restricted social media included Facebook, Instagram, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, X, and YouTube. The Australian eSafety Commissioner considered these to be likely age-restricted social media platforms at the start of Australia's minimum-age restrictions on 10 December 2025. Services that are primarily used for messaging, gaming, education, and child-focused content, such as Discord, Messenger, WhatsApp, Roblox, Steam and Steam Chat, Google Classroom, and YouTube Kids, were not included in the study scope.

This is an operational definition for the purposes of the survey measurement and does not imply that the legal status of all online services is definitive, final or exhaustive. Platform status may vary due to regulatory assessment, service design, compliance decisions and future guidance from relevant authorities. Thus, the interpretation of the platform classification in this study is not a final legal ruling but rather a research choice for the time being. This way, they were able to keep their concepts clear without making any assumptions about future regulations. It also enabled the study to assess adolescents' experiences in a consistent manner during the initial period of implementation of the law.

Circumvention attempts were assessed by using general, non-operational questions regarding attempts to maintain, regain or obtain access to restricted-platform accounts. The reported circumvention attempts, perceived motives, and emotional implications were focused on, but no technical procedures or operational details were collected. This wording was employed to safeguard the participants and to prevent the disclosure of information that would help to circumvent.

Parental mediation was measured by modified scales that differentiate between active mediation, restrictive mediation, and parental monitoring. The subscales were analysed separately to prevent the collapse of all forms of parental mediation into a single one psychologically. Control variables were age, gender, socioeconomic status, place of residence, intensity of social media use before the restriction or loss of the account, peer social media use, household digital access, and time since the social media account was restricted or lost.

Table

Study Variables, Measures, and Operational Definitions

Variable	Measure	Operational Definition
Psychological well-being	WHO-5 Well-Being Index	Positive emotional functioning and vitality. Higher scores indicate greater well-being.
Anxiety	Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7	Symptoms of excessive worry and anxiety during the previous two weeks.
Loneliness	Validated short-form loneliness scale	Perceived social isolation and dissatisfaction with social connection.
Life satisfaction	Satisfaction with Life Scale	Cognitive evaluation of overall life quality.
Restricted-platform account access	Researcher-developed items	Self-reported retention, loss, inability to create, or other access to an age-restricted platform account.
Reported circumvention attempts	Researcher-developed items	Broad self-reported attempts to maintain, regain, or seek alternative account access, without collecting technical details.
Active parental mediation	Adapted parental-mediation scale	Parent–adolescent discussion, guidance, and shared reflection regarding digital activity.
Restrictive parental mediation	Adapted parental-mediation scale	Parent-imposed rules or limits concerning account access and platform use.
Parental monitoring	Adapted parental-mediation scale	Parental awareness of, or supervision over, adolescents' online activity.
Control variables	Demographic and digital-context items	Age, gender, socioeconomic status, residence, pre-restriction social media use, peer use, household digital access, and time since account restriction.

Note. WHO-5 = World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index.

Procedure

Data collection was done in two consecutive phases. The survey was conducted from [date 1] to [date 2] and quantitative data was gathered. The survey results were initially analysed, and then, semi-structured qualitative interviews were held between 10 Oct 2025 and 15 Feb 2026. This allowed the qualitative phase to add context to the quantitative patterns in the early period after the implementation of Australia's minimum age restrictions.

The quantitative survey was conducted using a secure online platform. Age-appropriate information about the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, privacy protections, and resources for support was provided to participants and parents/guardians. The survey was tested with about 30 adolescents to test

the wording, readability, completion time, and clarity of the items related to access to accounts and parental mediation.

After preliminary quantitative analysis, selected participants were invited to take part in individual online semi-structured interviews. Interviews focused on adolescents' experiences with account restriction, account retention or loss, peer communication, parental responses, perceived benefits and challenges, and opinions about the policy. Interview questions did not seek operational information regarding the ways in which the restrictions can be overcome.

Ethical Considerations

The relevant institutional human research ethics committee approved the study. Australian ethical guidelines were followed in obtaining parent/guardian consent and adolescent assent. No identifiers, passwords, technical circumvention information or unnecessary personal information was gathered. The data were anonymised and stored securely and only accessed by the research team. Information about support services for youth mental health was provided to participants and a protocol was established for responding to distress or disclosures of harm.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics and the PROCESS Macro were used for quantitative analyses. Prior to regression analyses, reliability, missing data, and distributional assumptions were evaluated. Logistic regression was used to analyse circumvention attempts, and multiple regression and moderation analyses were used to analyse psychological outcomes and parental mediation effects.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The findings were combined in quantitative and qualitative ways in the interpretation process.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability.

Descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for the primary psychological-outcome and parental-mediation measures were computed prior to testing the study hypotheses. The general distribution of psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, life satisfaction, active parental mediation, restrictive parental mediation and parental monitoring was summarized with means and standard deviations among the adolescents. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were also calculated to determine the reliability of each scale, and to see if the items on each scale had acceptable internal consistency. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency of Study Measures

Measure	Possible Range	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Psychological well-being (WHO-5)	0–100	53.84	20.31	.86
Anxiety symptoms (GAD-7)	0–21	7.41	5.28	.89
Loneliness	6–30	18.62	6.17	.84
Life satisfaction (SWLS)	5–35	21.73	6.81	.88
Active parental mediation	1–5	3.42	0.86	.82
Restrictive parental mediation	1–5	3.18	0.94	.79
Parental monitoring	1–5	3.36	0.81	.77

Note. WHO-5 = World Health Organization Five Well-Being Index; GAD-7 = Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7; SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale.

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates. The internal consistency of all psychological-outcome and parental-mediation measures was acceptable to good (Cronbach's α = .77–.89). The mean scores revealed moderate psychological well-being, life satisfaction, mild to moderate anxiety symptoms and moderate loneliness in the sample.

Table 4

Adjusted Associations Between Account Loss or Restricted Access and Psychological Outcomes, Compared With Retained Account Access

Outcome	Standardised β	95% CI	p
Psychological well-being	−.07	[−.15, .01]	.094
Anxiety	.06	[−.02, .14]	.138
Loneliness	.13	[.03, .22]	.008
Life satisfaction	−.11	[−.20, −.02]	.021

Note. Reference category: Retained access to at least one account on an age-restricted social media site. Those who indicated that they had not used age-restricted social media platforms in the past 30 days were not included in the main analytical comparison. Demographic, digital-context and parental-mediation variables were controlled for in models. Negative coefficients mean that adolescents who reported account loss, blocked access, or were unable to create an account had lower outcome scores.

As indicated in Table 4, adolescents who reported losing access to an age-restricted social media account, being blocked from an age-restricted social media account, or not being able to create an age-restricted social media account had higher loneliness scores (β = .13, 95% CI [.03, .22], p = .008) and lower life-satisfaction scores (β = −.11, 95% CI [−.20, −.02], p = .021) than those who reported retaining access to at least one account on an age-restricted social media platform.

These results suggested that certain social and evaluative dimensions of adolescent well-being, such as loneliness and life satisfaction, were linked to account loss or limited access, but not all psychological outcomes. H1 was thus partially supported.

These statistical patterns were put into perspective with the qualitative interviews. Some participants reported that losing their account interfered with their daily coordination with peers, their understanding of social events, and their informal communication with peers. One participant explained:

"*It was not mainly about videos. I stopped knowing what people were planning, and I felt like I was outside the group*." (P07, aged 14, account loss)

Another participant described the consequences of being disconnected from platform-based peer communication:

"*People would talk about things that happened online, and I did not know what they meant. It made school feel more awkward sometimes*." (P12, aged 15, account loss)

However, the interviews also revealed that account loss was not experienced uniformly negatively. One participant described a reduction in constant online pressure:

"*At first I was annoyed, but I slept earlier and did not feel like I had to answer straight away all the time*." (P04, aged 13, account loss)

The quantitative and qualitative results indicate that there was a relationship between account restriction and a variety of experiences. Loss of an account was associated with feelings of loneliness and reduced life satisfaction for some adolescents. To others it seemed to alleviate stress from being constantly connected and responsive online.

Reported Circumvention Attempts and Psychological Outcomes

This section explores how reported efforts to maintain, regain or access alternative social media accounts of designated age-restricted social media platforms were related to psychological well-being, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction among adolescents. Table 5 shows the adjusted associations between circumvention attempts and the psychological outcomes.

Table 5

Adjusted Associations Between Reported Circumvention Attempts and Psychological Outcomes

Outcome	Standardised β	95% CI	*p*
Psychological well-being	−.12	[−.20, −.03]	.006
Anxiety	.18	[.09, .27]	< .001
Loneliness	.15	[.05, .24]	.002
Life satisfaction	−.10	[−.18, −.02]	.018

Note. *Adjusted for demographic, digital-context, and parental-mediation variables. Positive coefficients indicate higher anxiety or loneliness; negative coefficients indicate lower well-being or life satisfaction among adolescents reporting circumvention attempts.*

Table 5 revealed significant relationships between circumvention attempts and all psychological outcomes, with the highest relationship being with anxiety ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$). The results suggest that adolescents who attempted to keep or regain access to their accounts had worse psychological outcomes, but it is not possible to conclude that this is a causal relationship.

Interviews indicated that this was sometimes a sign of a desire to keep up with peers, and not just a resistance to the policy. One participant stated:

"*Everyone in my group was still using it, and I did not want to be the only one who did not know what was happening*." (P03, aged 14, reported circumvention attempt)

Another participant described anxiety associated with possible exclusion from peer communication:

"*I felt stressed because I thought people would forget to include me if I was not where they were talking*." (P15, aged 15, reported circumvention attempt)

Several participants also described conflict between the desire to remain socially connected and concerns about parental reactions:

"*I wanted to stay connected with my friends, but I did not want my parents to think I was hiding things from them*." (P18, aged 14, reported circumvention attempt).

The quantitative and qualitative results indicate that reported circumvention attempts could be due to perceived social exclusion, peer-related pressure, and family tension. These should thus be viewed as signs of adolescents' coping with the disruptions of their social routines, and not as mere evidence of rule resistance.

Parental Mediation and Adolescent Adaptation

Table 6 shows the adjusted associations between active parental mediation, restrictive parental mediation, parental monitoring, and reported circumvention attempts. The models tested whether the three dimensions of parental mediation were differentially related to circumvention attempts after controlling for demographic, digital-context, and account-access factors.

Table 6

Associations Between Parental Mediation and Reported Circumvention Attempts

Parental Mediation Type	Odds Ratio	95% CI	*p*
Active parental mediation	0.74	[0.59, 0.93]	.010
Restrictive parental mediation	1.29	[1.04, 1.61]	.022
Parental monitoring	0.93	[0.74, 1.17]	.526

Note. Logistic regression adjusted for demographic, digital-context, and account-access variables. Odds ratios below 1.00 indicate lower odds of reported circumvention attempts.

As indicated in Table 6, there was a negative relationship between active parental mediation and reported circumvention attempts (OR = 0.74, 95% CI [0.59, 0.93], p = .010), while there was a positive relationship between restrictive parental mediation and reported circumvention attempts (OR = 1.29, 95% CI [1.04, 1.61], p = .022). The relationship between parental monitoring and reported circumvention attempts was not statistically significant (OR = 0.93, 95% CI [0.74, 1.17], p = .526). These results suported H3a and suggested that the parental-mediation dimensions had varying cross-sectional relationships with reported circumvention attempts.

The qualitative association was consistent with the quantitative association and helped to provide context to it. Adolescents who indicated that their parents were supportive of their communication indicated less frustration and more acceptance of the policy. One participant stated:

"*My mum did not just say that I could not use it. She explained why the rule existed and helped me find other ways to keep in touch with my friends*." (P09, aged 13, high active parental mediation).

Another participant explained how parental dialogue reduced the sense of being socially excluded:

"*My parents understood that it was hard socially. They let my friends contact me in other ways, so I did not feel completely cut off*." (P14, aged 15, high active parental mediation)

By contrast, participants who experienced parental responses as mainly punitive or dismissive described greater resistance and secrecy:

"*When it was only rules and no conversation, it made me want to find a way around it more*." (P21, aged 15, high restrictive parental mediation)

The moderation analysis further indicated that active parental mediation buffered the association between account loss or restricted access and psychological well-being.

Table 7

Moderating Effect of Active Parental Mediation on the Association Between Account Loss and Psychological Well-Being

Predictor	*b*	SE	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Account loss or restricted access	−3.12	1.61	−1.94	.053	[−6.28, 0.04]
Active parental mediation	4.86	0.91	5.34	< .001	[3.07, 6.65]
Account loss or restricted access × active parental mediation	0.31	0.13	2.45	.015	[0.06, 0.56]

Note. *Adjusted for demographic and digital-context variables. The interaction indicated that active parental mediation weakened the negative association between account loss and psychological well-being.*

Parental mediation was statistically significantly related to the interaction between account loss or restricted access (b = 0.31, p = .015) as presented in Table 7. This interaction indicated that the negative

association between account loss or restricted access and psychological well-being was weaker at higher levels of active parental mediation. Interview accounts confirmed this pattern and provided a context for the relationship of open discussion and practical support to adolescents' adjustment to the social consequences of an account loss. The results of this study indicate that active parental mediation was related to reduced odds of circumvention attempts and a less negative cross-sectional relationship between account loss or limited access and psychological well-being.

Table 8

Association Between Account Loss or Restricted Access and Psychological Well-Being at Levels of Active Parental Mediation

Level of active parental mediation	Estimated b
Low (−1 SD)	−3.39
Mean	−3.12
High (+1 SD)	−2.85

Note. Negative coefficients suggest that adolescents who reported losing their accounts, being blocked from accounts, or not being able to open an account had poorer psychological well-being than those who continued to have access to their accounts.

Table 8 shows that the negative association between account loss or restricted access and psychological well-being was greater at low active parental mediation (b = −3.39) than at high active parental mediation (b = −2.85). This pattern was similar to the interaction found in Table 7, and indicated that a stronger negative relationship between account loss or restricted access and psychological well-being was linked to lower levels of active parental mediation.

Discussion

The present study investigated the early links between restricted-platform access, reported attempts to circumvent restrictions, parental mediation, and psychological outcomes for Australian adolescents after the introduction of the Social Media Minimum-Age Law. The integrated findings suggest that there was a heterogeneous response to account restriction among adolescents. Higher loneliness and lower life satisfaction were related to account loss or access restrictions, while reported circumvention attempts were related to poorer psychological well-being, increased anxiety, increased loneliness, and decreased life satisfaction. Active parental mediation was linked to reduced reported circumvention attempts, and seemed to moderate the relationship between account loss and reduced psychological well-being. Restrictive parental mediation was, on the other hand, linked to an increased risk of circumvention attempts reported by teenagers.

The results on account loss indicate that the short-term consequences of limited-platform use are likely to be more social than widespread clinical. Adolescents who reported loss of their accounts or blocked access to their accounts talked about problems with following peer conversations, awareness of social events, and participation in informal group communication. This interpretation is supported by the strong links found with loneliness and life satisfaction, but not with anxiety or psychological well-being. In many cases, these platforms seem to serve as a platform for social visibility and for everyday peer coordination for many adolescents.

The qualitative results also showed that loss of the account was not always perceived as a negative experience. Some participants reported that they felt less pressured to respond right away, fewer notifications, and better sleep habits. These opposing findings suggest that the link between social media access and adolescent health and wellbeing is not consistent. The consequences of account restriction could vary based on the function a platform serves in a youth's peer network, the presence of other communication methods, and how much online interaction replaces or complements offline social interactions. Less favourable outcomes were reported with all four psychological indicators for circumvention attempts. The results should not be seen as evidence of a negative effect of circumvention attempts on psychological well-being. Rather, they might suggest that those adolescents who were more likely to seek continued access to their accounts were those who felt more pressured by peers, excluded, or had been previously distressed. This is confirmed by the interview accounts. Participants often talked about trying to keep or get back into or out of the group as a way of staying informed, socially connected, and included in peer-group interaction, not just as a refusal of regulation. Theory of Compensatory Internet Use posits that reported circumvention attempts may be a result of a desire to maintain belonging and peer participation, not just a resistance to regulation.

Parental mediation was also important. Fewer attempts were reported in the context of active mediation, while more attempts were reported in the context of restrictive mediation. Interviews indicated that adjustment was promoted by discussion, explanation, and practical assistance, but that punitive responses may lead to greater secrecy and resistance.

Methodological Limitations

The cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences. Recall and social-desirability bias may impact self-reported account access, parental mediation, and circumvention attempts. The non-probability sample with quotas restricts generalisability, especially to different and digitally

underserved groups. Findings from this study should be viewed as preliminary as it was done early in the implementation of the policy. Finally, interview accounts provided context for survey patterns, but were not designed to estimate prevalence. Longitudinal and more representative research is needed.

Policy and Practice Implications

Evaluation of policies should not only focus on restricting access to the account, but also on the inclusion of peers, family support, and alternative communication. Unintended exclusion can be minimised through the promotion of inclusive peer practices and safer communication options in schools and youth services. Parents can help with adjustment by actively intervening, such as talking, explaining, and providing assistance to keep the child socially connected. Digital governance should be both platform-based and family, school and youth service oriented.

Conclusion

This study revealed that there was a diverse reaction from adolescents to the Australian Social Media Minimum-Age Law. Loneliness and life satisfaction were associated with account loss, and circumvention attempts were associated with poorer psychological outcomes. Peer inclusion, alternative communication and parental support were identified as key qualitative findings.

More adaptive responses were related to active parental mediation, while more reported circumvention attempts were related to restrictive parental mediation. The effectiveness of age-based regulation needs to be evaluated not only on the basis of account restrictions, but also on the basis of the social adjustment of adolescents and the support they can receive from their families, schools, and youth services.

Declarations

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This study involved the use of artificial intelligence tools to assist with generating instructional ideas, improving language clarity, and enhancing the organisation of the manuscript, consistent with COPE guidance. All AI-assisted outputs were carefully reviewed, edited, and validated by the author to ensure academic integrity, originality, and accuracy. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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