National Mental Health Commission
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Submission to the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety

Australian Government
National Mental Health Commission

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Introduction

The National Mental Health Commission (the Commission) provides cross-sectoral leadership on policy, programs, services and systems that support better mental health and social and emotional wellbeing in Australia. There are three main strands to the Commission's work: monitoring and reporting on Australia's mental health and suicide prevention systems; providing independent advice to government and the community; and acting as a catalyst for change.

The Commission's underpinning principle is the Contributing Life Framework. This framework acknowledges that a fulfilling life requires more than just access to health care services. It means that people who experience mental illness can expect the same rights, opportunities, physical and mental health outcomes as the wider community.

The Commission welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety. This response specifically addresses the Terms of Reference published by the Committee, and the Commission has focused on children and young people given research and consultation recently undertaken by the Commission has focused on these priority groups.

Should you wish to discuss this submission in further detail, please contact Michael Copland, Executive Director, Policy at michael.copland@mentalhealthcommission.gov.au.

Terms of Reference

The Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety will inquire into:

(a) the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, including harmful content or harmful conduct;

(b) evidence of:
(i) the potential impacts of online harms on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians;
(ii) the extent to which algorithms used by social media platforms permit, increase or reduce online harms to Australians;
(iii) existing identity verification and age assurance policies and practices and the extent to which they are being enforced;

(c) the effectiveness, take-up and impact of industry measures, including safety features, controls, protections and settings, to keep Australians, particularly children, safe online;

(d) the effectiveness and impact of industry measures to give parents the tools they need to make meaningful decisions to keep their children safe online;

(e) the transparency and accountability required of social media platforms and online technology companies regarding online harms experienced by their Australians users;

(f) the collection and use of relevant data by industry in a safe, private and secure manner;

(g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online; and

(h) any other related matter.

The Commission's Response

The Commission welcomes the inquiry into social media and online safety, and the exploration of impacts on mental health. Social media is used in many ways which are positive for Australians, including being used to access news or entertainment, to shop or run a business, to find jobs, information and support, and to connect with others and build a sense of community. It is important to recognise that there is not conclusive evidence that social media causes mental ill health.[1] Instead, research indicates that impacts are highly specific to the individual.[2]

The Commission strongly recommends that any attempts to mitigate the risks of social media should not undermine the benefits of its usage. Social media is already an integral part of our lives and is considered mainstream internationally. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has enabled social connection which has otherwise been limited. Different age groups and cohorts make use of online platforms differently, presenting different risks and opportunities, for example for elderly persons or migrant and refugee communities. By extension there needs to be specific attention paid to cohorts to identify entry points to leverage the positives, as well as determining risks to ensure specificity in mitigation measures. Any proposed tools, resources, or regulatory changes should be consulted on and designed in partnership with the groups that they are intended to impact, to ensure they will achieve intended outcomes and consider the nuances of how social media is used by different cohorts.

In response to the Terms of Reference:

Section (a)

The Commission recommends that the benefits of social media are also considered when exploring harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms. In consultation with young people, many reported social media as a tool that can be used to support their mental health and wellbeing, and it has been suggested that in 1 in 5 young people turn to social media for support on important issues in their lives.[3] Young people did identify that harmful content and harmful conduct can be prevalent online and that this impacts their wellbeing, and specifically raised racist and discriminatory material and actions as being of priority concern. Additionally, technology use may be associated with reduced sleep,[4] which can have negative impacts on mental health.[5] Social media use specifically has not been strongly linked to reduced sleep in current research.

Section (b)

In research to date, the Commission has not found a strong negative link between social media and mental ill health. For children and young people, digitalisation[a] may amplify the impact of other drivers of poor mental health. An evidence-based example of this is where an individual is concerned about body image, this may be amplified by social media. Specifically, greater engagement in appearance focused activities on social media such as photo related Facebook use, but not general Facebook use, was found to be associated with greater body-image related thoughts and behaviours such as thin-ideal internalisation and body surveillance.[6] On balance, social media has also been found to play a vital role in young people's lives, through delivering educational outcomes, facilitating supportive relationships and promoting a sense of belonging,[7] as well as exposing people to humorous and inspirational content that can mitigate anxiety and depression.[8]

As the Committee assesses the evidence of the potential impacts of online harms on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians, it will be important to consider the specific circumstances in which social media and digitalisation more broadly may cause harm, rather than assuming this is true for the majority of users. The Commission's view is that in the vast majority of circumstances, digitalisation may amplify issues which contribute to poor mental health, rather than being

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[a] The Commission defines digitalisation as the increased availability and use of technology in daily life.

the source of poor mental health. Further research into the relationship between digitalisation and mental health is required across different age groups and demographics, as this relationship is likely to be different for each group.

Sections (c) and (d)

There is a high use of online platforms and social media amongst Australian children and young people, with an estimated 97% of households with children aged under 15 years having access to the internet.[9] Children and young people use social media differently to adults, and this should be considered when designing tools for safety. Additionally, each social media platform has a unique profile of users, and the way these platforms are utilised is likely to vary between age groups.

In consultation with young people, increased accountability for social media service providers regarding harmful material and conduct was raised as a desired outcome. Young people noted that they often struggled to report harmful content and have it successfully removed on platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook. This may be an area for exploration by the Committee. Alongside this, consideration to how harmful and triggering content (such as that which promotes suicide, self-harm, or disordered eating) can be removed before it is seen will be a critical issue in this space. Any proposed tools, regulation or resources should be designed in partnership with children, young people and parents/carers to ensure they will achieve the intended impacts and consider the nuances of how children and young people use social media.

Gaming platforms, especially those hosting online multiplayer gaming, are another widely used entertainment source which require consideration. Eight in 10 young people aged 8–17 played games online in the 12 months to June 2017, and an estimated 17% of multiplayer gamers experienced in-game bullying.[10] Reporting and moderating of bullying is a widely available tool, but the extent to which this is achieving intended outcomes should be explored alongside other possible in-game safety features.

Finally, as children and young people have identified they use online resources for mental health support, there are potential opportunities to further connect those in crisis with supports. An example of this may include utilising algorithms to provide prompts for resources when words associated with poor mental health or potential self-harm are used.

Sections (e) – (h)

The Commission supports exploration of these areas, included how Governments can support positive uses of social media, by the Committee. An example of Government action that acknowledges that social media platforms can provide a positive way to socially connect, share and support one another, is the #ChatStarter campaign which the Commission launched in July 2021. Across the social media platforms, the combined organic and advertising credited posts saw #ChatStarter messaging reach an estimated audience of 10,868,858 people which resulted in 58,526 taking action to view the available resources on the Head to Health ChatStarter page, a positive outcome supporting the mental health and wellbeing of families.

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