

Safeguarding Children's Well-Being in Social Media Environments: Evidence and Policy Implications of a 16-Year Age Threshold in Malaysia

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Abstract

The rapid integration of social media into the daily lives of children and adolescents currently has increased concerns regarding online safety, cognitive development, and psychological well-being. In response to these challenges, Malaysia has proposed a minimum age threshold of 16 years for independent access to social media platforms. This study undertakes a conceptual policy analysis that synthesizes interdisciplinary evidence from developmental psychology, mental health research, and international regulatory practices to evaluate the rationale and policy implications of the proposed age threshold. The analysis indicates that the 16-year minimum age functions as an evidence-informed and precautionary measure, aimed at reducing children's exposure to online harms such as manipulative platform design, cyberbullying, excessive social comparison, and privacy risks during a critical developmental stage. At the same time, the study acknowledges key implementation challenges, including enforcement limitations, reliance on parental supervision, potential circumvention behaviours, and socio-economic inequalities in digital supervision and access. Drawing on comparative international experiences, the paper proposes a layered governance framework that integrates regulatory and platform responsibilities, education and digital literacy initiatives, and continuous monitoring and policy adaptation. Within this framework, the 16-year age threshold is conceptualized not as a standalone restriction, but as a policy anchor embedded within a broader child-centred digital governance strategy. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on youth digital well-being by offering a context-sensitive policy approach that balances protection, participation, and equity in Malaysia's evolving digital ecosystem.

Keywords

Child well-being, social media governance, age threshold, digital safety, Malaysia.