Implementing ID Based Age Verification on Social Media Apps

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Executive Summary

Social media connects people all over the world. However, social media is very dangerous among children and young teenagers, more specifically of the age range of 13-15. As of January 2023 the minimum age a user must be in order to have an account on social media is 13 years old. By raising the age of joining social media to 16, users will be more mature in comparison to their 12 and 13 year old counterparts. They will be able to recognize the signs that younger teens may not. Especially if these signs are spoken about in school, and if their parents talk to them about them. Raising the age limit by using ID verification instead of typical birthdate centered age verification will help prevent children from lying about their age online. This will help protect children from the negative impacts social media can have.

This has been utilized on platforms that are not social media platforms. Age verification has helped Doordash ensure they are delivering alcohol to legal adults. Using that format of age verification (ID verification) would help keep young internet users safe. There are some drawbacks that may come from this, such as advertisements on social media platforms. However, this will allow new advertisers to come onto the platforms as well. Overall, the benefits of using ID verification outweigh the negatives.

When are policies going to be created to protect the children of the future? The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) of 1998 is a federal law in the United States. This law was enacted to protect the privacy of children under the age of 13 by requesting parental consent for the collection or use of any personal information. Since the enactment of this law, which has now been effective for 22 years, new social media platforms with novel features have been created. As such, policymakers should take into account the novel features of these social media platforms when writing policies to protect children. These new platforms have become a source of danger to children.

 In March 2024, Utah will become the first state to require social media companies to verify that users are at least 18 years of age, which will impact over five million account holders (Emma Kansiz). With this policy, Governors are attempting to make social media platforms accountable for the privacy of the age group that is using their platforms. Even though Utah is making changes in their policies there are other states that are still being impacted. Children as young as 13 years of age are reported to have depression, anxiety, and self-harm as a result of social media use, e.g., Tik Tok, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Also in social media there are risks that the child of 13 years can encounter cyberbullying, invasion of privacy, and the child seeing offensive images or messages. These are the negative results of allowing children to have social media at a young age.

The government of the United States needs to take a step toward creating a policy that will keep children safe. The problem began when social media apps allowed children to have an account at age of 13, but also gave them the ability to create an account without age or identity verification. The social media app was meant for adults to connect and also to share information with their family and friends, but also to learn new things. Children should be connecting and

sharing information at school, not on social media apps. New policies need to happen in the United States, such as identity verification on social media apps.

The Importance of Identity Verification

The current process of creating a new account for social media is to enter your name, phone number or email, date of birth, and gender. However, there should be an additional step when creating an account, in which the user should provide an identity verification (driver's license, passport, government ID). Identity verification is used by businesses to ensure that users or customers provide information that is associated with the identity of a real person. This will prevent fake accounts from being created, but also users will be held accountable for their actions on social media (Tik Tok, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat).

The platform requires the user to present an identity verification (driver's license, passport, government ID) on social media and will allow the user to present their real age. There are accounts on social media that do not have the exact age of the user. In the Guardian, the author does write that "The survey found that 83% of the 11 to 15-year-olds whose internet usage was monitored registered on a social media site with a false age" (Mark Sweney 2013). These are accounts created by a child with the age of an adult or vice versa. This mentioned is that platforms have no possible way of knowing that an adult is sending inappropriate messages or pictures to a child. Another thing is that the 'adult' account being used by a child can be seeing any kind of 'adult content' instead of 'child content'. Identity verification would change the lives of children, but also of parents because that would allow parents to be less concerned about what their children are experiencing on social media. However this ID verification would allow the

platforms to be aware of the kind of age users are creating accounts, but also allows them to create different policies for different age groups.

When presenting an identity verification (driver's license, passport, government ID) on social media, the other requirement should be that the user is older than 16 years old instead of 13 years old. The reason is that at the age of 13 is when a teenager is in the stage of their life when they are barely comprehending themselves. There is information that demonstrates that at the age of 16, "...most teens are starting to think in abstract ways. They can deal with several concepts at the same time and imagine the future consequences of their actions" (Healthwise Staff). This demonstrates that at the age of 16, a child is a little more aware of their identity, but also aware of the consequences of their actions. At the age of 13 children are not aware of their identity, and at this age, children commit a lot of mistakes without thinking about the consequences. The difference in age is three years which affects their interactions on social media. The 16-year-old will be able to be a little more responsible for how to behave on social media, and the 13 years will not question their actions or what they do on social media.

Social Media Negatively Impacting Lives

The existence of social media was to help users connect digitally with friends, colleagues, and family members around the world. This was created for adults to connect, but it became a source for children. A source that became for children communicating with strangers across the world and being excessive with it. This impacts children physically and mentally. There are many examples of how social media impacts children. The first one is the amount of time spent on the platform. The age of children to be on social media is currently 13 years, but there are children younger that have access to the platforms. However, it is important to realize the amount

of time they are spending on social media. This survey shows the amount of time that children are spending on social media, "A 2022 survey conducted by Common Sense Media found that the average 8 to 12 year old spends 5 hours and 33 minutes on social media per day…"(Emma Kansiz 2023). The amount of time children that are spending on a screen is the responsibility of not only the parent but also of the platforms. There should not be a child spending 1 to 3 hours on social media (Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram). In that age period children should be playing outside for hours, but also concreting in school. These platforms are not providing educational things to children, but instead adult news. They are learning about what is trending or what the Karshaisns are doing next. The child should be learning about literature, chemistry, history, or math. These platforms are consuming the time of our children. This is a problem that can be solved, there are other problems with children being on social media that could not be fixed.

The problem with social media not having identity verification is that the users create accounts to 'catfish' other users. There are cases of users that want to 'catfish' to harm other individuals. In 2022 there was a man, Austin Lee Edwards, age 28 years, who created a profile of a fake teenage boy to converse with a 15-year-old girl. However, Edwards took advantage of the fake profile to drive from Virginia to California to kill the family and also kidnap the young girl (Emily Shapiro 2022). This is one of many cases that have happened in the United States of people constantly being 'catfished' because platforms do not provide any identity verification unless the user is trying to get the account back. The problem with social media having no identity verification is a user with bad intentions wanting to hurt someone physically or mentally will 'catfish'. The platforms need to guarantee that all ages are connected to the account because the 15-year-old case could have been voided.

Existing Policies

Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter all have differing terms of service (ToS) and privacy policies. The language used in each is precise and must be examined. Both Facebook and Instagram are owned by the company Meta. In Facebook's ToS, they say that though Facebook is for everyone, they do not want people under 13 nor convicted sex offenders on their website (n.d. 2020). The sister platform of Facebook, Instagram, says in their ToS that their platform is: "safe, secure, and in accordance with the law" (n.d. 2020). The Snapchat ToS follows suit, but clarifies that if a user is under 18, they must have parental permission to use the platform. Unlike the other three, Twitter's ToS does not have an exclusion of convicted sex offenders. The Twitter ToS does not single out sex offenders, which results in less scrutiny over users who could be harming young people on the platform.

ToS	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Snapchat
Textual Evidence	The ToS says, "you cannot use Facebook if: You are under 13 years old. You are a convicted sex offender" (n.d. 2020).	The ToS mirror's Facebook's, saying, "you must be at least 13 years old" and "you must not be a convicted sex	The ToS says, "you must be at least 13 years old, or in the case of Periscope 16 years old" (n.d. 2022).	The ToS says, "no one under 13 is allowed to create an account or use the Services. If you are under 18, you may only use the Services with

		offender" (n.d. 2020).		the prior consent of your parent or legal guardian." (n.d. 2023). They also make a point that there are exceptions to the minimum age here "(or, if greater than 13, the minimum age at which a person may use the Services in your country)" (n.d. 2023).
Is there an age restriction? If yes, what age?	The minimum age to join the platform is 13 years old.	The minimum age to join the platform is 13 years old.	The minimum age to join the platform is 13 years old, unless they wish to use Twitter's	The minimum age to join the platform is 13 years old.

			streaming platform Periscope, where the age minimum is 16 years old.	
Do they limit who can join?	Yes, users under 13 and sex offenders cannot make an account.	Yes, users under 13 and sex offenders cannot make an account.	Yes, users under 13 cannot join.	Yes, users under 13 and sex offenders cannot make an account.
Do they have ways to limit access?	Yes, users must insert their date of birth, and if they wish to secure their account they must send in one or more forms of personal ID.	Users "don't have to disclose your identity on Instagram, but you must provide us with accurate and up to date information", meaning the user verifies their	They have the date of birth and email/SMS verification.	They have the date of birth and email/SMS verification.

		identity by inputting their date of birth (n.d. 2020). Users can also report others they suspect are sex offenders.		

All of these platforms— excluding Twitter— have set up different ways to limit access to these parties. Meta companies (Facebook and Instagram) have the most effective methods to determine if an account belongs to a sex offender or not. Facebook requires users who wish to create an account to send in a form of identification. This can be a government issued ID card, a library card, rewards card, and other items with identifying information. This way, they are able to verify who someone is. All that must be displayed on one of these articles is the person's name, and date of birth. Furthermore, on both Facebook and Instagram, users can report someone they believe to be a sex offender. Meta requests that users provide either: a link to an existing sex offender registry, an article, or court document regarding the user believed to be an offender (n.d. 2020). This system primarily puts the power in the hands of the people. It is better because they allow people to report others for this reason and require them to present evidence. Having people present evidence shows that they are not going to just ban people with no purpose.

When discussing the ToS of various social media services, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat have an exclusion for sex offenders using their program and draw a hard line

preventing those under 13 from using their platform. Of the major tech platforms, Twitter does not follow this theme, with the only singling out of individuals being "you must be at least 13 years old, or in the case of Periscope 16 years old" (n.d. 2022). The difference is that Periscope is a video streaming platform owned by Twitter and has gained a reputation to have people looking for child pornography on the app. Twitter not having that stipulation as a part of their ToS where other companies do, is another reason that users should have their ID linked to their account.

**Shortcomings of Existing Policies**

One of the major shortcomings with these policies is the way age verification presently works. The age verification system of Instagram is simply entering your birthday. This is how Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat primarily verify age. This method is ineffective for many reasons. The most obvious one is that anyone can lie about their age. Saying that the platforms are against having sex offenders join without any way to verify a user's offender status is an ineffective implementation of their ToS. It allows users to lie about who they are which could put some users in danger.

Inputting the user's date of birth is not enough to protect them from online predators. With existing policies, there is no way to determine the user's true age. The primary shortcoming is the way that Instagram does not require ID in the same way Facebook does. The reasoning behind this is likely because of the difference in user bases. As displayed in the following chart, the user base of Instagram is primarily in the 18-29 year old range. One flaw of Figure 1 is the way that they do not take users aged 13-16 into account, because they are a part of the user base. It is something that cannot be denied, as even in their ToS they specify users must be 13 as a minimum age. Because younger people do not always have an ID companies may worry using IDs will isolate users. This study also does not take into account the 16 year old user base of

Instagram, which definitely exists. The fact that Facebook— also owned by Meta— uses ID verification and Instagram does not hinge on the different user bases. It is a barrier that prevents some people from accessing the platform as easily. Facebook ID verification has its own flaws. For example, it takes some time to get your account approved and ID verified. Given the funds that Meta has, it may be ideal to invest in more software and employees to promote ID verification at Instagram.

Age gaps in Snapchat, Instagram use are particularly wide, less so for Facebook

% of U.S. adults in each age group who say they ever use ...
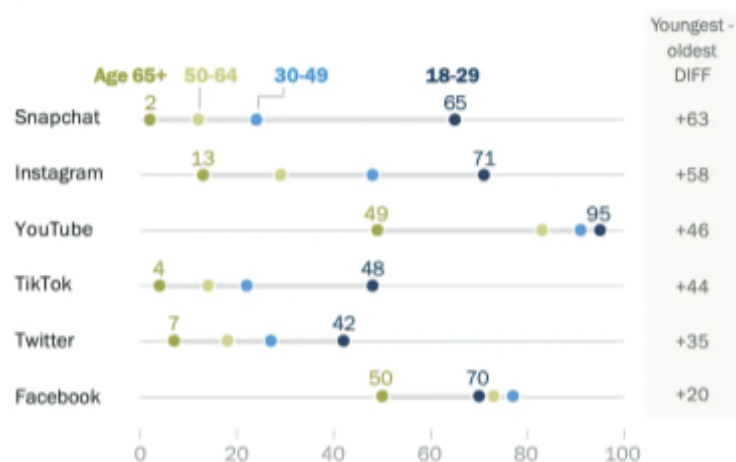
Note: All differences shown in DIFF column are statistically significant. The DIFF values shown are based on subtracting the rounded values in the chart. Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.
"Social Media Use in 2021"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure One
Schaeffer, K. (2021, October 7). 7 facts about Americans and Instagram. Pew Research Center. Retrieved March 8, 2023, from
https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/10/07/7-facts-about-americans-and-instagram/

Solution

The solution is to enforce companies verifying the IDs of users while also raising the age for users to sixteen. Using Facebook's policy requirement as an example, the solution would require a user to send in a picture of an ID card to make an account. The forms of ID could be anything. Government ID would be the primary form accepted, that would allow people to only submit one article. Or two articles that could be any of the following: a school ID, rewards card, library card, employment verification, loyalty card, and more. As long as there is consistent proof that the user's birthdate and name are the same, then the ID can be used. This enforces users being at least sixteen, because oftentimes they receive their school ID cards in high school. In the case that a person younger than sixteen would want access to social media, they would have to have parental permission. In order to verify that, a parent would have to provide their ID alongside an identifying factor for the (at minimum) 13 year old child.

Additionally, users aged 13-15 would have limited access to accounts. The reasoning behind this is to prevent users from contacting others through direct messages (DMs) unless they are someone that the user adds themselves. Their parents would also be aware of people interacting with their children because they would be a part of the account. The purpose of having the parent verify the account is to protect the child. By keeping the parents informed, their child will be safer. When the user turns 16 their account can have the parental controls released. This allows the child to eventually have some independence from their parents. It also allows the parents to have some involvement and peace of mind knowing their child is safer online. This function is meant to allow young teens some access to social media while also preventing them from being endangered by predators online.

The parental approval for accounts will also help protect kids' mental health. By allowing the parents to be aware of their children's accounts they can check in on them. This will also

promote more openness between kids and parents. Because parents will have some access to their kid's account there will be less to hide. At the same time, kids will still be able to message friends that are approved by themselves or parents. Parents will also be able to see who their kids are adding to monitor if they are someone they know or not. They will also be able to look at what content their children are consuming. That way there will be more moderation done by parents which will take some pressure off of the companies to moderate things as closely.

Solution and Additional Benefits

One of the additional benefits of this solution is added security. The users will have to have their personal data disposed of. It will promote data safety because people would be handing over their ID cards. The issues that may arise from that are data leaks. However, in order to build trust with their users, companies are incentivized to responsibly discard the data. If continual data leaks happen, people will not feel safe giving their data to companies. It is bad for business if customer's data is leaked. The incentive for companies to get rid of the data is financial, but could hold a lot of weight in negotiations.

The second benefit is that it will promote kids to socialize more in person. Florence Martin et. al says that social media leads to younger people (13-16) becoming more socially isolated than peers who may not be on social media (Martin et. al, 2018). Through taking away some of the direct messaging features it will promote people to speak to each other in person. This also still allows them some access to social media, but in a safer setting. Taking away the ability to speak to strangers will put kids in a safer online space. It will also allow them to express themselves but also protect them from strangers.

How Doable is this?

The usage of people's personal IDs has been used plenty of times in online commerce and on social media platforms to verify a user's identity. When someone is going to unlock their account they must verify who they are with their personal ID. Account verification with personal ID is something that is already in practice. There is existing technology that is used to verify a person's identity and ID on different platforms. There are also companies that can do the same thing where employees verify the ID instead of the technology. The fact that this is being done in other companies shows that it is doable.

Is this a bad solution?

This solution can negatively impact social media apps because the age limit will increase to 16 year olds. Lowering the amount of users that have an account that are under the age of 18 years old. There have been studies that show that ninety percent of teenagers between the age of 13 years to 17 years olds use social media. Social media apps are dependent on their users and ninety percent of them are under the age of 18 years old. Social media apps will not benefit from having the age limit set to 16 years olds, because they will lose ninety percent of their users. In losing ninety percent their sales will decrease and lose money. Losing users means that the app will not be used as much. For example, Facebook was one of the most popular apps because it was created to get to know people around campus for college students. However, recently facebook has been losing users because there are apps like Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram that have been popular among kids and teenagers. So Facebook was losing users so they decided to buy Instagram so they would not have competition.

Is this solution good enough?

In raising the age requirement for social media, conflicts between parents and their kids will appear. Although it may sound great for parents to get their children off social media it

affects the relationship between the parents with their kids. Some benefits that social media has is that it allows teenagers to create online identities that help them build social networks (Mayo Clinic Staff). Social media also helps teenagers be able to promote small companies who are just starting off. This solution does not want to take away the resources that teenagers use to feel included in a group or society. Or to take away the apps they use to promote their business. Having the age raised to 16 years olds minimum is hard and it will impact teenagers under that age because they are used to having social media at such a young age.

How can this solution be put to good use?

This solution will help parents and child relationships by increasing confidence in one another. Kids and teenagers want to be independent and having the trust and confidence of their parents is a way parents can form a stronger bond with their child or children. This solution will be useful because parents will have to trust their child that they can be independent and create a stronger bond with them. Also, it will benefit children and teenagers because they will get a sense of independence but they know that their parents will be aware that they are on social media. By knowing that, teenagers and kids who are under the age of 16 will be conscious and know that there are limits in being able to have social media.

This solution will also protect young teenagers especially by adults who are trying to groom them through social media apps. This solution will lower the risk of having children and teenagers be mentally affected by adults who try to groom them. It will also help prevent the teenagers and kids from being kidnapped because they shared information to strangers through their account. According to *Social Media Kidnapping Statistics* by Lindsay Muntingh it says,

> "In a world hit by a pandemic that forces adults and children to spend excessive time
> online, predators and kidnappers are now a greater danger than ever before. Using social

media platforms and other internet resources, these criminals can locate and target anyone who has left a digital paper trail for them to follow" (Muntingh).

Living in a world where there is a constant worry about the safety of children and teenagers is stressful. With the solution where children and teenagers under the age of 16 can not add anyone unless it is they have the user of the person they are trying to add. Snapchat has a section called "Quick Add" where you can add people that either have mutual friends with you, or random users. If the teenagers and child is under the age of 16 they will not be able to access that seccion for privacy reasons. Mainly to have a control of who will be able to get access to those users that are under the age of 16 years olds. Snapchat already has this solution in their settings, creating a way where once the user has reached the age of 16 they can decide if they want to be shown the "Quick Add" section.

What is the problem and what is the solution?

The problem is that there are young teenagers getting affected by social media and the standards society sets. In the article, *The Impact Of Social Media On Teens' Mental Health* by the HEALTH University of Utah says, "Research has shown that young adults who use social media are three times as likely to suffer from depression, putting a large portion of the population at risk for suicidal thought and behaviors" (HEALTH Univeristiy of Utah). This shows that being on social media has negative effects on young adults. Meaning if younger teenagers and children they are getting affected more because they do not understand that there are consequences for their actions. In addition, children and teenagers are growing up in a society where they need to meet certain standards like how a girl should look and act, and how a boy should act. In having the age limit to 16 years old and older it will give a chance for children and young teenagers to have a better understanding of what is real and what is fake on social media.

By increasing the age limit on social media apps it would decrease mental health problems. There is a study from 2019 from the article called *Teens and social media use: What's the impact?* By Mayo Clinic Staff. They say more than 6,500 12 year olds to 15 year olds in the United States spend more than three hours a day using social media. In addition, another study from the same year shows that more than 12,000 13 year olds to 16 year olds in England use social media more than three times a day and they predicted that it leads to poor mental health and well being in teenagers (Mayo Clinic Staff). Furthermore, In the same article as previously mentioned, "A 2105 study found that social comparison and feedback seeking by teens using social media and cell phones was linked with depressive symptoms" (Mayo Clinic Staff). This means that teenagers look for approval from social media and other teenagers who are on the app. In addition to them, teenagers also try to meet the standard that society has made for teenagers.

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