



Impact of Social Media on Children's Development and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia, and pay respects to all Elders, past, present, and emerging.

About Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia is the national leadership body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention. As a community-controlled organisation, it is governed and controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts and peak bodies, working in these areas to promote collective excellence in mental health care.

Social Media: Opportunities and Challenges

Social media has transformed the landscape of communication, information exchange, and interpersonal dynamics in contemporary society. With the rise of technology and widespread internet accessibility, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, Twitch and TikTok have become integral components of daily life, particularly among younger generations.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in Australia, the rapid adoption of social media presents a complex duality of opportunities and challenges. These digital platforms offer unique avenues for identity exploration, community connection, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. However, they simultaneously expose users to potential risks, including cyberbullying, racial discrimination, and societal pressures, which can adversely affect child development and social and emotional wellbeing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people use social media more than their non-Indigenous peers (e-Safety Commissioner, 2022; Rice et al., 2016). This heightened engagement underscores the need for tailored approaches that leverage the positive aspects of social media while mitigating associated risks.

Social media affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in several ways:

- It provides spaces for children and young people to express their cultural identity
- It helps them stay connected with family and community, even over long distances
- It can improve their digital skills, which may help with education and employment
- It can also harm mental health through exposure to bullying, racism, and harmful content
- It raises questions about how to keep online spaces culturally safe

Creating culturally safe online spaces means designing social media environments that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities, languages, and perspectives. This involves removing harmful content, preventing racial discrimination, and ensuring that community guidelines



prioritise the wellbeing and dignity of Indigenous users. It also means that platforms need to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in content moderation policies and safety features to ensure these spaces are safe and supportive (Productivity Commission, 2020).

Understanding the impacts of social media on child development and social and emotional wellbeing is crucial for informing policy development and evidence-based strategies. By leveraging the potential of social media while implementing culturally appropriate safeguards, there is an opportunity to enhance engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, potentially leading to improved health and wellbeing outcomes and stronger community connections.

Recommendations

To address the complex role of social media and the impact it has on the development and social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia recommends the following:

1. Culturally responsive digital content and safety mechanisms

Government agencies should partner with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts to co-design culturally relevant digital content and safety features. This approach should build upon existing governance and advisory structures, such as the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) Policy Partnership, ensuring that content and safety measures are culturally responsive and aligned with community needs.

2. Youth-led policy development

Utilise Gayaa Dhuwi's existing Youth Collaborative Network to guide policy development, aiming to enhance digital safety, literacy, and social and emotional wellbeing in relation to social media. As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention, Gayaa Dhuwi is well positioned to coordinate these efforts, ensuring that they reflect the voices, insights, and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.

3. Tailored digital literacy programs

Develop, fund, and implement tailored programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, caregivers, and communities to enhance digital literacy and critical thinking, empowering communities to navigate social media responsibly and safely, while simultaneously celebrating cultural identity.

4. Culturally adapted resources

Provide culturally adapted resources and workshops for caregivers and community leaders on safe social media practices and recognising signs of social media-related distress in children and young people.



Child Development and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, social media serves as a vital platform for identity exploration, community engagement, and cultural expression. These digital spaces allow youth to connect with their ancestry, share stories, and build relationships with peers, fostering a sense of belonging and pride in their culture. While social media offers these enriching opportunities, it can also present challenges; the anonymity it provides may lead to experiences of racism, harassment, and cyberbullying (Jakubowics et al., 2017). Such negative interactions can impact mental health and social and emotional wellbeing, contributing to feelings of isolation, depression or anxiety (Brown et al., 2022). Social and emotional wellbeing encompasses not only mental health but the interconnectedness of cultural identity, spiritual connections, community relationships, and connection to Country. Child development is also viewed holistically, emphasising the importance of nurturing children's physical, emotional, social, and spiritual growth within their cultural context (Dudgeon et al., 2014). Research indicates that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth face significant challenges online, highlighting the importance of creating supportive environments that celebrate their resilience and provide tools to navigate these complexities. By recognising both the strengths inherent in their cultural identities and the challenges they encounter in digital spaces, we can foster a more supportive framework for their growth and wellbeing (Milroy & Dudgeon, 2013).

Exposure to social media can have a significant impact on the development of children and young people. Research indicates that excessive social media use can have substantial effects on wellbeing and cognitive development (Rice et al., 2016). During early childhood and adolescence, the brain undergoes significant neurobiological changes, making it particularly vulnerable. This period of development raises concerns about potential negative impacts, especially given the rising rates of mental ill-health, suicidal ideation, and self-harm (ABS, 2021). However, establishing a direct causal link remains challenging, as social media also offers benefits such as facilitating connections for isolated individuals (Moran et al., 2024). Addressing this complex issue requires a culturally responsive approach that increases benefits while mitigating risks, considering both individual experiences and broader societal factors that contribute to challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (Carlson, 2024).

Research indicates that social media use among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people is notably higher than their non-Indigenous peers, with approximately 60 per cent of individuals engaging with social media platforms compared to 42 per cent (Rice et al., 2016). With over 40 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population aged between 5-14 years, many children are finding opportunities to make friends and connect online, highlighting the significant role social media plays in communication, entertainment, cultural expression, and community building (ABS, 2021; Rice et al., 2016). The internet also serves as an important resource for accessing health information; one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (35 per cent) use it to seek information about physical, sexual, and mental health issues, as well as emotional support services—far exceeding the national average of 13 per cent. While these statistics reflect the positive potential of social media, they also underscore some challenges. Aboriginal and



Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to experience hurtful treatment online than their peers (68 per cent compared to 45 per cent), with a significant percentage exposed to harmful material (76 per cent). Such experiences can impact their mental health and academic performance, with research showing that 31 per cent reported impaired mental health and 23 per cent experienced lower grades at school (ABS, 2021; eSafety Commissioner, 2022). By recognising both the strengths and challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in digital spaces, we can better support their wellbeing and resilience in navigating these environments.

Current Policy Landscape

The Australian Government is taking significant steps to enhance the online safety of young people by proposing a minimum age of 16 for social media platforms. During the National Cabinet meeting on 8th November 2024, First Ministers reached a consensus on this important legislation. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese emphasised the need to prioritise the safety and mental health of young Australians, stating, "Social media is doing social harm to our young Australians, and I am calling time on it." He reassured the public that services focusing on education and health would remain accessible to young Australians (Australian Government, 2024). The Government plans to present this legislation to Parliament during the fortnight of November 18, 2024, with implementation expected no earlier than 12 months after the bill's passage. This timeline allows for the necessary systems and processes to be established. This initiative is part of a broader commitment to reduce risks associated with online harm, including cyberbullying, exploitation, and exposure to inappropriate content (Australian Government, 2024).

The eSafety Commissioner has voiced support for the government's proposal. As Australia's independent regulator and educator for online safety, the eSafety Commissioner is dedicated to promoting safe online practices among children and all Australians (eSafety Commissioner, 2024). While their resources are not specifically tailored for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, they provide valuable information for educating families about online safety. The *Online Safety Act (2021)* establishes measures for regulating harmful online content deemed inappropriate for children. By fostering a collaborative approach that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, efforts to create a safer online environment for all young Australians can be strengthened.

In response to the need for a coordinated approach to improve early childhood outcomes, the Australian Government launched the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy in 2020. This Strategy aims to enhance collaboration across governments, services, and community-controlled organisations to better meet the needs of children, families, and communities. Developed in partnership with SNAICC – National Voice for our Children and the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the Framework prioritises children's rights through holistic, evidence-based approaches that recognise the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families while addressing developmental gaps resulting from the ongoing impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma (SNAICC, 2021). The Framework calls for a whole-of-government and whole-of-community response to support children's needs across various areas such as early learning, health, disability, wellbeing, care, and development. It aligns with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020),



aiming to improve early health outcomes, increase participation in early education, reduce over-representation in out-of-home care, and support families in housing and employment. At its core, this Framework empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to lead initiatives that ensure their children's wellbeing, reflecting the vision of self-determination outlined in the Uluru Statement from the Heart. It acknowledges that achieving these goals requires genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (SNAICC, 2021).

Policy Influence and Impact

Implementing these recommendations could have a significant impact on governmental and industry policies, fostering safer digital spaces that respect cultural identities and support positive youth development. By advocating for mandatory cultural safety standards in digital spaces and accountability measures for social media platforms, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia seeks to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth can engage in safe, supportive online environments that promote social and emotional wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

Call for Change

Collaborative partnerships between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts in the fields of digital media, culture, education, mental health, and social and emotional wellbeing can leverage diverse knowledge and experiences to co-design culturally relevant digital content, platforms, and safety features that are responsive to community needs (Featherstone et al., 2023). These partnerships have the potential to enrich digital content and safety mechanisms by integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and cultural perspectives (Productivity Commission, 2020). This approach aligns with the values, traditions, and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, fostering strong connections to community, culture, and Country (Walker et al., 2021).

Building upon the strong foundations of existing governance and advisory structures, such as the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Policy Partnership and the Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia Youth Collaborative Network, can enhance the long-term success and effectiveness of these initiatives. Established structures bring invaluable community relationships and deep insights into the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By leveraging these existing partnerships, initiatives can benefit from enhanced credibility, trust, and community-driven approaches, ensuring that digital content remains culturally responsive and aligned with community aspirations (Featherstone et al., 2023).

Gayaa Dhuwi's Youth Collaborative Network empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth to share their insights, discuss their experiences, and advocate for their needs in the digital realm. This network amplifies young voices on crucial issues, including the opportunities and challenges of digital engagement. By harnessing the wisdom of these youth-led networks, policy development can be tailored to reflect the unique perspectives and aspirations of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Gayaa Dhuwi's expertise in social and emotional wellbeing, mental health, and suicide prevention complements this youth-driven approach, fostering policies that enhance resilience, critical thinking, and digital capability. This collaborative model ensures that Aboriginal



and Torres Strait Islander children and young people remain at the forefront of shaping their digital futures.

Research highlights the positive impact of digital technologies and social media on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, contributing to strong cultural identity, enhanced community connections, and improved mental health and social and emotional wellbeing (Carlson & Fraser, 2018; Dudgeon et al., 2020). Tailored programs focusing on digital literacy, critical thinking, and online safety can further empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to thrive in digital spaces. Collaborative partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, community leaders, and experts can ensure these programs are culturally resonant and aligned with the unique needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (Rice et al., 2016). Such initiatives have the potential to equip children and young people with skills to navigate online platforms effectively and safely, fostering their ability to recognise and respond to harmful or misleading content, thereby supporting their social and emotional wellbeing in the digital realm.

Caregivers, community leaders, and elders are invaluable guides in nurturing the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Their wisdom and experience can be further enhanced through culturally adapted resources and workshops that build on existing knowledge to support children and young people in navigating social media safely and responsibly. These initiatives can explore the unique online experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, including their resilience in facing challenges such as racism and cyberbullying (Garvey et al., 2021). Workshops have the potential to offer practical tools that complement traditional knowledges, empowering caregivers, and leaders to foster healthy digital habits, set boundaries, and recognise signs of social media-related distress. By integrating cultural strengths with digital literacy, these resources can facilitate open, culturally grounded conversations about online experiences, reinforcing the protective factors within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that support youth wellbeing in the digital age (Rice et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The rapid integration of social media into the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people presents both unique opportunities and significant challenges. The complex interplay between social media use, cultural identity, community connections, and social and emotional wellbeing calls for a comprehensive, culturally grounded approach that promotes self-determination and prioritises cultural safety.

By implementing culturally responsive digital content and safety mechanisms, fostering youth-led policy development, creating tailored digital literacy programs, and providing culturally adapted resources, we can significantly contribute to harnessing the benefits of social media while mitigating its risks. Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, particularly through initiatives like Gayaa Dhuwi's Youth Collaborative Network, ensures that strategies are rooted in the lived experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.



Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership in Social and Emotional Wellbeing, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

It is crucial that these recommendations are implemented with ongoing community consultation, rigorous evaluation, and a commitment to adapting strategies as the digital landscape evolves (Productivity Commission, 2020). Through these concerted efforts, we can transform social media from a potential source of harm into a powerful tool for cultural expression, community connection, and positive development.

This approach aims to create a digital environment that not only safeguards but also nurtures the holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. By embracing these strategies, we can foster a social media ecosystem that contributes to stronger, more resilient communities and improved health outcomes for current and future generations.



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