ONLINE AGE ASSESSMENT

IN BRIEF

- Increasing psychological distress among minors is being linked to online services.
- Age restrictions are being discussed as a simple solution.
- Many methods of determining age are risky; privacy preserving methods are under development and clearly preferable.
- Age restrictions alone will not solve significant problems – minors could switch to unregulated services.
- All children's rights must be taken into account. An assessment of impacts on consumers is also needed.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

There is currently intense debate about the introduction of age restrictions in the digital space. This is prompted by studies on the dangers to children and young people posed by excessive use of social media and smartphones, as well as online radicalisation. But how should age-verification technologies be evaluated with respect to data protection, consumer protection and children's rights?

The digital space offers a wide range of problematic content and functions such as depictions of violence, pornography, radicalisation and addictive interactions, which are becoming accessible to minors at an increasingly early age. Added to this is the high psychological strain they cause. In line with the precautionary principle, there is therefore an urgent need for action. However, other children's rights, such as the right to social participation and access to information, must also be considered. Against this backdrop, age restrictions on social media, for example, are being discussed as a possible solution. There is a wide range of methods for determining age.

Many approaches use biometric methods to estimate age based on the face or to compare the face with the photo on a photo ID. Other methods estimate age based on platform usage, while others derive age from credit card information. It is particularly common to have the option of self-disclosure, for example by clicking a button to indicate that you are "over 18 years of age", entering your date of birth in your user account or agreeing to terms of use that stipulate a minimum age.



Andrej Lisakov, unsplash.com

Age restrictions are being discussed as a possible solution to mental burden of minors

In the EU context, two further approaches are currently being developed: the EU's age verification app and the European digital identity wallet only share information about being above a certain age threshold for the purpose of age verification. However, according to current plans, a smartphone is required for this. A concept developed by the data protection NGO epicenter.works is similarly data-efficient, allowing guardians to set the age in children's/young people's accounts.

BASIC DATA

Project title: Altersfeststellung im digitalen Raum - Online age assessment
Project team: Fischer, F., Pauls, A.
Duration: 07/2025 – 12/2025
Funded by: Arbeiterkammer Wien – Chamber of Labour Vienna

KEY RESULTS

The approaches examined can be roughly divided into three groups: Self-disclosure methods are data-sparing but easy to circumvent. Robust data-sparing methods are still being developed.

The majority of methods are problematic from a data protection perspective, as they process sensitive data and have a high potential for abuse. They also have the effect of "training" users to share this information with various platforms.



Image: Joni Lin/ Unsplash

Selfies, often compared with photo ID, are a common method of age verification.

Consumers are therefore required to be able to correctly assess whether this data is being processed by trustworthy parties. This assessment can be particularly difficult for minors, creating new risks for them.

Most data-saving methods, on the other hand, require a current Android or Apple smartphone, which in turn increases the pressure to own and carry a new, expensive smartphone.

A fundamental problem with age restrictions is a possible displacement effect, as it is unclear whether small platforms and, for example, messenger services and chatbots would be covered by a social media ban: in order to circumvent age verification, users may switch to other, unregulated and possibly particularly risky platforms. A social media ban for children could also postpone the challenge of addressing and dealing with the risks of the internet. Ultimately, a social media ban would also interfere with other children's rights, such as access to information and social participation.

WHAT TO DO?

Age restrictions, such as a social media ban, carry significant risks, depending on how they are implemented. At the same time, they risk being ineffective. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need for action.

- Among the methods of age verification, data-minimising methods are clearly preferable to those that process large amounts of sensitive data.
- The current debates shift responsibility onto consumers. Instead, platforms should be held more accountable, for example, to prevent harmful design patterns.
- Media and AI literacy urgently needs to be developed, especially among caregivers, as age verification can only be part of the solution.
- Processes must be developed to gradually introduce minors to the digital space so that they can learn to deal with the risks competently.
- All children's rights must be considered and weighed up, which is why it is appropriate to involve children and young people in debates on age restrictions.

FURTHER READING

Fischer, F., Pauls, A. (2025):
Altersfeststellung im digitalen Raum. Bericht-Nr. ITA-2025-06; ITA: Wien.
epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-projektberichte/ITA-2025-06.pdf

CONTACT

Fabian Fischer
Email: *tamail@oeaw.ac.at*
Phone: +43 1 51581-6582



IMPRINT: Owner: Austrian Academy of Sciences; Legal person under public law (BGBl. 569/1921 i.d.F. BGBl. I 130/2003); Dr. Ignaz Seipel-Platz 2, A-1010 Vienna; Editor: Institute of Technology Assessment (ITA); Bäckerstraße 13, A-1010 Vienna; *www.oeaw.ac.at/ita/en*. | Frequency: The ITA Dossiers are published irregularly and publish the research results of the ITA. The ITA Dossiers are exclusively made available open access to the public via the Internet portal "epub.oeaw": *epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-dossiers* | ISSN: 2306-1960 | This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: *creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/* | ITA Dossier no. 88 February 2026 | *epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-dossiers/ita-dossier088en.pdf*, Co-author: Pauls, Anna