A Question of Balance: The need for age verification

A report by AgeChecked, an age verification provider for online businesses of age restricted goods and services.

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Introduction

The Internet has never been more accessible. Thanks to the development of powerful smartphones, mobile tablets, intelligent Smart TVs and Internet-enabled games consoles, adults and children are now spending more time online than they were ten years ago.

While the Internet has revolutionised how children can learn and explore the world, it has also made it extremely challenging to monitor what they are accessing and who they’re communicating with. Protecting our children online has become of the highest priority to shield them from being able to view inappropriate content or age-restricted services. This could be anything from purchasing age-restricted goods, such as knives and alcohol, to viewing unsuitable content, like adult-only material or violent or distressing videos via social media sites.

While customers have to provide evidence that they are over a certain age when buying age-restricted products in physical stores, age checks are seldom carried out on the Internet when people are buying the same products. Selling restricted products to underage people in stores is illegal, but we mustn’t forget that the same rules apply online under various laws, such as the Offensive Weapons Act 1996, Licensing Act 2003 and Children and Young Persons (Protection From Tobacco) Act 1991.

Encouragingly, clamping down on access to or the sale of age-restricted goods and services to minors online is quickly becoming a key focus for the UK Government. New laws are due to come into effect this year to enforce online age verification. For instance, the Digital Economy Act is one new law that is set to come into effect this year that will regulate access to adult-only content online.

New regulations will result in website visitors in the UK having to prove their age before they can access adult websites, meaning that site owners will be legally required to install age verification controls by the time the law comes into effect.

The new laws were brought in due to concerns over how the adult content sector has been marketing its services, and the lax attitude it has had towards safeguarding minors from being able to view content.
Currently, the adult industry seems to use popular social media platforms like Snapchat to market to potential clients because they have less restrictions than ones like Facebook, which has effective measures in place to remove adult accounts. Promoting explicit content on platforms is easily accessible by children, which is very concerning. Unfortunately, at the moment, there is nothing with these new regulations to stop sites from continuing to advertise their services in this way.

The scope of any protections needs to be based on the behaviour of businesses that supply age-restricted content and products, and it will be interesting to see how the Digital Economy Act seeks to address such marketing attempts. According to current predictions, the new legislation is expected to alter attitudes towards how other age-restricted material is regulated online.

Given just how much access children have to inappropriate material and age-restricted goods, we decided to investigate how young people be appropriately protected online. We launched this report to look at recent case studies of underage sales to highlight the importance of carrying out age verification checks to prevent children and young people from buying or accessing adult content.

The report has been put together to advise online businesses on the importance of having online checks in place in order to stay on the right side of the law. It will also provide guidance on the steps that businesses can take to check the age of customers attempting to buy restricted goods or services in a quick and easy way.

But of course, it’s also important to consider those customers who are of legal age to buy such goods – businesses don’t want to be turning away legitimate customers from making purchases by having lengthy, complicated age verification tools on their sites. Therefore, the report will also look at how online businesses can avoid basket abandonment. Age checking measures on a site need to be a proportionate response to the risk posed to children, yet not cause unnecessary friction to the customer journey.

Alastair Graham, CEO of AgeChecked, an age verification provider for online businesses of age restricted goods and services.
Key findings

We surveyed 1,500 UK adults about their concerns around internet safety and their views on age verification. The key findings are highlighted below:

What we found:

- One in six children begin their online experience at age three.

- The sites that cause the most concern to parents are: sites containing pornographic material (75%), social media (71%) and video sharing platforms (70%).

- The majority of people would be most willing to provide a pre-set password (44%), a different password for each site they used (42%), or a driving licence (31%) when asked for proof of age online.

- Consumers would be least willing to provide credit or bank card details (13%) or a mobile phone number (18%) to prove they’re over 18.

- Only 8% would be happy to enter financial information (e.g. bank details) to prove their identity.

- Risk of identity theft (73%), theft from a bank account (58%), and the inconvenience of having to remember another password / user ID (37%) are the main concerns when entering personal details online.
Children are starting to log online from a younger age and our research found that children from as young as three have started to access the Internet, with over a quarter (28%) using the Internet before they are of school age.

A particular concern for parents is their children’s social media use - 59% of children have used social media by the age of 10, even though many of these have a minimum age requirement of 14.

But, social media is just one platform that worries 71% of parents. Our research found that there are numerous site causing parents concern including:

- Sites containing pornographic material (75%)
- Video sharing platforms (70%)
- Gaming sites with in-app purchases (51%)
- Film/TV sites (46%)
- Shopping sites where restricted items (knives, alcohol) can be purchased (40%)

Quite rightly, parents are increasingly concerned about what their children are doing online and are looking for ways to prevent them from accessing unsuitable material or purchasing age-restricted goods. Because unfortunately, it can be relatively easy for children and young people to access products, services and content online that are deemed age-restricted.
Also high on the list of concerns is:

- Children may share content that could embarrass them in the future e.g. when they apply for jobs (58%).
- Or they may use the Internet to try and obtain harmful items e.g. legal highs, e-cigarettes (47%).
- 44% of parents fear that children may spend money without parental approval e.g. sites that hold parents’ bank details such as iTunes or game downloads.
- Children may buy restricted items, such as knives (36%).
- 57% of parents believe current age restrictions to curtail the online activities of their children are not working effectively.

Children now have instant access to a whole host of websites and information, which can leave them vulnerable to finding content or buying services/goods they shouldn’t. This puts parents in a very difficult position – they’ve worked hard to protect their children from dangers in the real world, but how do they go about replicating this online when it can be easy to by-pass age checks and restrictions?

Preventing children from accessing adult content online recently hit the headlines with the tragic case of Molly Russell, whose father said that accessing graphic self-harm material via Instagram contributed to her suicide.

As well as being able to access adult content or services, 68% of parents are extremely worried that their children could be communicating with people they don’t know online, which could put them at risk of being groomed.

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In some circumstances, where children are able to access content, services or products that are age restricted, the effects can be devastating. For instance, recent statistics show that over 55,000 children in the UK are now problem gamblers – many have become addicted after being exposed to games via social media, online casinos and games consoles. Developing such a damaging addiction from a young age, such as gambling or even alcohol abuse, can have extremely destructive consequences long into the future. How are children going to be able to secure a stable future for themselves if they’re racking up huge gambling debts or are alcohol dependent when they grow up?

But aside from the economic damage that access to age-restricted material can cause, there are the psychological effects too, such as increases in antisocial behaviour, psychological trauma, access to hate-speech, online grooming and so on. When children are able to view extreme or inappropriate content regularly online, there is the risk that they will become desensitised to it or may see it as ‘normal’ – they may not necessarily know that it’s unsuitable.

Sadly, a study from the NSPCC supports the idea that children are greatly influenced by the content they often see. It found that a third of child sex abuse cases are carried out by other children, and the problem is being driven by access to adult-content by under-18s. This just goes to show how vulnerable and impressionable children really are, and why safeguarding them from harmful material is absolutely vital.
Are site owners doing enough to protect children online?

Of course, while parents have a great responsibility to safeguard their children, it’s almost impossible for parents to monitor exactly what they are doing online 24/7. The duty to keep children out of harm’s way and make sure they can’t access things they shouldn’t also lies with site owners. At the end of the day, they are the ones providing the content and services.

But alarmingly, recent studies have found sites owners are not doing their part to protect children from obtaining age-restricted goods or services online. For instance, retailers selling knives appear to be falling short when it comes to checking the age of their customers. Last year, trading standards officers and police in North Yorkshire carried out mystery shopper investigations in which eight out of 10 shops sold underage people a range of knives including machetes and lock knives.

A police investigation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland found that around 50% of online retailers were willing to sell a knife to a child without carrying out age checks in 2017. With site owners failing to carry out age checks, making it easier for underage people to get their hands on knives, crimes involving sharp weapons actually soared to their highest levels since 2010 in the UK last year.

When children are able to get hold of dangerous items such as knives, the consequences can be devastating. In 2015, a 16-year-old boy purchased a knife through Amazon’s online store without having to prove his age. He later used the weapon to fatally stab and kill Bailey Gwynne, a local Aberdeen schoolboy.

This incident sparked national grief, but it also brought criticism upon Amazon for its lacklustre method of age-checking customers. Amazon has since established a policy whereby a signature from someone aged 18 or over is needed in order to receive the package. Yet, this tactic is still falling short of preventing underage sales, with packages often being delivered and received by customers without the recording of a signature.

Since 2016, Government consultations have been ongoing to decide on whether to ban the home-delivery of knives bought online, in response to the attack on the young schoolboy.
Instead, customers would have to visit a physical store once the purchase has been made in order to provide proof of age.

Alongside toughening up regulations for age-restricted goods and products, adult services and content are set to become more difficult for underage children to access. Under the Digital Economy Act, all adult-content sites will be required to prove that each and every customer is of the correct age under the Digital Economy Act. An increasing number of UK retailers that sell age-restricted goods online, such as alcohol, solvents, tobacco and e-cigarettes, are putting measures in place and are verifying their digital users.

With new legislations in the pipeline, it seems as though the Government is cracking down on online retailers and businesses to ensure that they’re abiding by the law and are doing their part to prevent underage sales. Pressure is now being put on businesses to step up their game and age check every single customer that completes a transaction online. Verifying a small sample of a customer base or requesting that customers tick a box to state they are 18 or above simply won’t do anymore.

Those businesses that do break the law and sell or grant underage access to age-restricted services or products could face legal penalties, ranging from an unlimited fine to even two years imprisonment. There is no way of getting around the fact that website owners that are selling age-restricted goods have just the same responsibility to verify the age of their customers as high street businesses have. Now is the time for site owners to begin investigating options for age verification to protect their businesses and reputation.

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“Protecting our children online must be of the highest priority. The laws that apply in the real world also apply in the digital world, and we mustn’t forget that. We prevent children from buying age-restricted products or services on the high street, those protections should be in place online. While responsibility lies with parents to keep their children safe, businesses also need to realise that they have responsibilities and a very important role to play too.

“With the Digital Economy Act coming into effect later this year, online businesses need to give serious consideration as to how they are age-checking their customers. They can’t just hope that everyone trying to buy age-restricted goods and services will provide their correct date of birth. The Government is cracking down on age verification – there have been changes proposed to how knives can be bought online, and now adult content and gambling will be subject to stringent age checks – so businesses really can’t afford to ignore the law, otherwise they could be facing huge fines and other punitive measures.”

Alastair Graham, CEO of AgeChecked
What kinds of information are people willing to share to prove their age?

On many websites, the onus is often placed on the customer to be honest when providing their correct age in order to buy age-restricted items. But, it can be difficult for site owners to confirm if the information they provide is actually true. So, how can online businesses check that the information customers are providing, such as a date of birth, is accurate and proves their real age?

When attempting to purchase age-restricted goods and services in the real world, customers will likely be asked to prove their age by showing official documents. For instance, a driving licence would help confirm a person’s date of birth as it’s a legal document.

The same types of age checks can also be implemented online by asking customers to provide certain pieces of information to prove their age. Along with using passports and driving licences as verification methods, data, such as credit cards, would also be a viable solution – only those over the age of 18 can actually apply for a credit card. Or, asking customers to set up an account on the website and register their details and a password can also act as a means to deter under-18s. Customers should only need to verify their age once when the account with the website is first set up, then they can continue to use it over and over again by just signing in with a password.

So, what other types of information would consumers be willing to provide in order to confirm their identity, aside from date of birth?

- Almost half (44%) of people would be most willing to provide a pre-set password
- 42% would be happy to use the password every time they visited a different age restricted website.
- 31% would agree to using a driving licence when asked for proof of identity or age
- A fifth (20%) would be willing to provide details of a household utility bill

The options people would be most happy to use to prove their age seem to be the ones that contain a minimal amount of sensitive personal information. Simply having to use a password to access various sites is unlikely to put your personal data at risk. And most adults will have had to flash their driving licence at a cashier when trying to buy age-restricted goods in store.

But there are some items of personal information that some people would not be willing to provide. 87% would decline to enter their bank account details to websites, mainly due to concerns over privacy and security of personal data. The majority of people are particularly worried that they would not know exactly how their personal information would be used after their age was verified, and if the site would continue to store their details.
So, how much effort would a customer be willing to put in to complete their purchase? And what would be a push too far, encouraging them to abandon their baskets and go elsewhere, perhaps to an alternative site that doesn’t require proof of age?

Achieving the right balance

Not everyone trying to purchase age-restricted goods will be underage and so, as with most purchases, consumers will want to complete the transaction as quickly and as easily as possible. If they have to spend a large amount of time filling in a long form, they’ll likely take their custom elsewhere to a business that does not require such lengthy information.

So, how much effort would a customer be willing to put in to complete their purchase? And what would be a push too far, encouraging them to abandon their baskets and go elsewhere, perhaps to an alternative site that doesn’t require proof of age?

Only 8% would be happy to enter financial information (e.g. bank account details) directly on to a website to verify their age, meaning that basket abandonment is more likely if this was the main verification check. This reflects the security concerns that shoppers have when giving out personal details, such as bank details, in case their data ended up in the wrong hands or was compromised, as they don’t know how the website will use the information or how it will be stored.

Having said this, providing confirmation that the user has a registered credit card is one way to confirm a user’s age - only those over the age of 18 can actually apply for a credit card. Rather than having to provide personal bank details that could be used to identify an individual, simply proving ownership of a credit card via a properly certified age verification tool would show the user is over 18, while keeping them anonymous.
The top concerns over having to enter personal details online to access a website are:

- Risk of identity theft
  - 73%

- Theft from their bank account
  - 58%

- The inconvenience of having to remember another password or user ID
  - 37%

- Others were worried about the ‘big brother’ effect, being spammed, and didn’t want people to know that they were accessing certain sites, such as gambling sites.

What we can see from these results is that the majority of customers would be at least willing to provide any personal details that could be used to identify who they are – they would be happy to prove there are over 18, but only by giving out basic information that would not put them at risk of being hacked or scammed. Crucially, age verification systems, unlike identity systems, never store user data and provide customers with a completely anonymised account. Customer identity is kept entirely secure, as these tools never require users to provide sensitive data, like bank account details.

“While protecting children online has to be of the highest priority, we also have to bear in mind that site owners still have genuine customers to serve. A minority of customers attempting to purchase age-restricted products or services will be under 18, so the customer journey must ensure that genuine customers can complete their purchase quickly and easily. Retailers don’t want to be causing unnecessary hassle to actual customers that may force them to turn to a competitor. But, they must abide by their responsibility to keep young people safe while online and prevent them from accessing content they shouldn’t.

“Age verification methods must be kept simple and straightforward, so they don’t delay sales or encourage shoppers to abandon their cart, and they also must offer high levels of security and buyer protection so that personal information is kept safe. No one wants to leave themselves open to identity fraud or financial scams because they’ve had to provide their details online to prove their age. Retailers need to give serious consideration to how they’re choosing to verify their customers – using a legally certified age verification tool would help to put customers’ minds at ease that their personal information will be kept safe and will not be used inappropriately.”

Alastair Graham,
CEO of AgeChecked
Getting in line with regulations

Clamping down on the sale of age-restricted goods to minors or underage access to adult-only content online is quickly becoming a key focus for the Government. For online businesses that supply age-restricted material and products, this means that pressure is mounting on them to put in place the right procedures to ensure they’re meeting new regulations. Otherwise they could face a damaged reputation, hefty fines, or even a prison sentence.

Fortunately, there has been a rise in online age verification tools being introduced to tighten online age checks to prevent children from being able to access and purchase age-restricted goods and services.

Online age verification technology, such as AgeChecked, does exactly what the name suggests. It is used by websites to authenticate the age of users to make sure that they are definitely 18 or above.

Age verification works by requiring website users to create an account and set up a secure password, in order to access age-restricted products or services online. Once the user has chosen their password, the technology will ask them to choose from a series of verification methods. This could be anything from a credit card, mobile network or a driving licence to clearly establish the person’s age. When the account is set up and the age verified, customers can then simply use their password to sign into websites and access age-restricted products or services in an instant.

Unlike identity systems, these age verification tools never store information on users – instead they provide customers with a completely anonymised account. Websites that use the service to verify their customers will only receive a ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ notification when customers attempt to access their site, meaning that personal information or data, such as bank details, will never be shared.

These tools are incredibly easy to use, and accounts can be set up in just a few minutes, so that they do not interrupt the customer journey. Users only have to verify their age once, then they can use their fully verified account time after time to purchase age-restricted goods in just a few clicks.

Transactions will be smooth, convenient and easy, reducing cart abandon rates and ensuring a quality service, all while allowing retailers to stay on the right side of the law.
Conclusions

The current laws to prohibit the underage sale of age-restricted goods or access to age-restricted material online are clear – products and services should not, under any circumstance, be sold or made accessible to those who are underage, online or in store. Yet, many site owners are still failing to check the age of consumers to ensure they are old enough to complete purchases of view content. Ultimately, these businesses are acting illegally and are putting young people in harm’s way of perhaps physical and psychological dangers. Not to mention, these companies could themselves face catastrophic consequences in terms of fines or reputational damage.

In today’s Internet-centric world, children have access to all kinds of content – some useful and educational, but some that’s not so appropriate and can be extremely damaging. Encouragingly, the UK is now taking a pioneering stance on the enforcement of age restriction laws to protect and safeguard minors from accessing adult-content. And, with greater scrutiny being placed on the sale of age-restricted products, all online companies may soon find themselves facing mandatory regulations.

With the Government taking a tougher stance on age verification, site owners can’t afford to ignore the law. They need to start giving serious consideration to how they’re proving the age of each and every customer. Just one underage sale could land them in hot water, so they need a genuine method of guaranteeing that those trying to access age-restricted content and goods are the correct age.

It makes perfect business sense for site owners to invest in legally-compliant age verification tools now to comply with their legal, and also moral, obligations. Safeguards need to be in place to protect our children against online risks.

For more information, please visit: www.agechecked.com
About AgeChecked

AgeChecked is a service that provides online age verification for websites that sell age-restricted goods and services. The technology combines many age-checking methods into a single solution that is straightforward for businesses to integrate onto their websites.

The service is fast and easy for consumers to use, and the wide range of age verification methods available lead to the highest age checking pass rates online. Checks occur rapidly, with the majority of checks completed in under 10 seconds.

To find out more about AgeChecked, please visit the website or click on this link for a short video introduction to the service.