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RUPTURING DIGITAL CHILDHOODS AND PARENTING IN AUSTRALIA? SOCIAL MEDIA BANS, PRIVACY, SCREEN TIME, AND GENERATIVE AI

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Introduction

In the current state of global political, environmental and social challenges, it is perhaps unsurprising that digital childhoods and parenting are in continuous flux as well, with families of all configurations experiencing digital and cultural ruptures. In Australia this discontent with the digital world has led to unprecedented legislation banning all children under the age of 16 from having accounts on social media platforms from December 2025. Despite being popular with the broader public, mental health advocates and most academic research suggest the ban is more likely to do harm than good for Australian children's health and wellbeing. Parents are conflicted in attempting to balance the question of young children's privacy with the connectivity and support that may come in sharing images or stories that includes young people's photos and data. Despite being widely seen as outdated in scholarly circles, the focus on screen time, measuring children's time before a screen without context or questioning the quality of the experience, continues to be a dominant idea Australian families wrestle with. And now Generative AI tools present new challenges as they are integrated widely

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into new and existing platforms and apps without concurrent programs to raise users' literacy with families and children increasingly using these tools. These Australian examples speak to similar concerns globally, with other nations' parents and children wrestling similar issues, contextualized locally. Governments across the world are similarly considering social media bans for children, and thus watching the Australian experiences with implementing the ban, and attempting to enforce age verification, with great interest. This panel presents four papers which explore these ruptures in the Australian context, but with clear global implications.

Panel Overview

Our first paper, 'On Board the Social Media "Ban Wagon": Regulatory Theatre, The Public Child and the Hyper-Enthusiastic State' examines the way that the Australian legislation banning users under the age of 16 came into being. In the media-fueled moral panic about children and teens using social media, the figure of the 'public child' was evoked, while the actual voices of specific Australian children were largely muted. In light of looming national elections, government desire to keep the media (and News Corp in particular) on side supercharged the national debate as legacy media decried social media's impact on all Australian kids (to help sell newspapers), ignoring vast scholarship indicating the benefits networked connectivity affords young Australians. Ultimately, this paper argues that the ban was a political and economic coup, seen as winning votes with anxious parents, regardless of the potential harm that may result in disconnecting Australians under 16 from the benefits of social media, and networked connectivity and communication.

The second paper in this panel, "I Probably Should Be Concerned, But I'm Really Not" – Concepts, Concerns and Contradictions in New Parents' Approaches to Negotiating their Children's Data Privacy', maps a disconnection between scholarly concern about children's privacy with the ways that parents operationalize young children's privacy on a day-to-day basis in their everyday lives. Extrapolating from 28 semi-structured interviews, this paper reveals how parents negotiate and re-negotiate the sharing of their children's images and data; the social support and emotional benefits of, for example, sharenting can outweigh broader more abstract privacy concerns – especially for parents from marginalized groups. Privacy can become a consideration more in the social domain, or protection from imagined predators, rather than privacy from online companies. Feeling unable to retain control over the collection and sharing of children's data as children begin to attend daycare and educational institutions is also significant, particularly in light of the increasing platformization of parent-daycare communication. The article highlights that parents are disproportionately responsabilised for ensuring children's data privacy, and that this responsibility must be shared more equitably between families, tech providers and institutions.

The third paper, 'Navigating Talk About Kids and Tech: Ruptures in and Through Screen Time Discourse' addresses the dominance of the notion of screen time, despite the vagueness of the term, and most scholarship refocusing on the question of the quality of screen experiences rather than the quantity of time spent as the more important consideration. Yet the notion of screen time still dominates everyday discussions of children's media use. This paper balances the rupture of parent's everyday concerns

about correctly configuring screen time use with the actual anxieties and ruptures experienced by carers trying to navigate the contradictory messaging around screen time. Combining TikTok video analysis of screen time-related video and interviews with Australian caregivers, this paper reveals that the myths that screen time cause inattention, diabetes and autism continue to circulate. In everyday settings, parents navigate both being judged for children's screen uses whilst at times also wanting to judge and police others. Ultimately, the persistence of screen time as a dominant idea and frame for children's lives ruptures those lives and the lives of parents in similarly persistent ways.

Our final paper, 'Generative Imaginaries? How Generative AI Tools Visualise Children, Families and Australianness' outlines a project where a range of popular visual generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools were prompted to produce a range of images about children, parents, families and Australia to explore how these ideas may circulate in everyday use. This is situated as urgent work since GenAI tools are integrated widely into everything from Smartphones to MS Paint, and increasingly in areas where children and young people may be using GenAI, or dealing with their outputs, without necessarily having the literacy to contextualize the images and outputs. Collectively the GenAI outputs revealed the tools predominantly reproduced existing power structures, defaulting, for example, to returning images of white-skinned, Western children when simply prompted to produce an image of 'a child' or 'an innocent child'. The paper concludes noting, in light of the ways Australia is represented, that while Generative AI tools are not inherently racist, their training data and current operation produces results that would likely be interpreted as racist by everyday users of these tools.

ON BOARD THE SOCIAL MEDIA ‘BAN WAGON’: REGULATORY THEATRE, THE PUBLIC CHILD AND THE HYPER-ENTHUSIASTIC STATE

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Introduction

On Mother’s Day 2024, the South Australian Premier announced he had appointed a former Chief Justice of the High Court to provide the government with advice about the legal mechanisms that could be deployed to age restrict children’s social media access.¹ This announcement unleashed an emotional national debate, culminating, in November, in the remarkably swift passage through the Australian federal parliament of an amendment to the Online Safety Act to rupture the capacity of the nation’s under-16s to use social media accounts.

There is no question that technology companies must do more to protect children who engage with social media platforms (Livingstone & Third, 2017). However, the amendment was rushed through parliament; lacked the detail necessary to underpin effective implementation; and evidence strongly suggested it was unlikely to address youth mental health challenges (Marwick et al, 2024). Why was the state in such a hurry to pass this ‘Swiss cheese’ legislation, ostensibly in defense of the nation’s children?

This paper begins by observing that the tenor of the events preceding the amendment was decidedly melodramatic, leading commentators to describe them as “regulatory theatre” (Scimex, 2024). Close analysis of political and media commentary indicates that, consistent with the melodramatic form, the dominant narrative cast the nation’s teenagers as in dire threat from the external forces of ‘devices that kill’ and the ‘scourge of social media’. Mobilising archetypal characters and sensationalist claims, bolstered by reference to a superficial if not spurious evidence-base about the negative impact of social media on young Australians’ mental health, this melodrama generated strong – indeed, seemingly unassailable – emotional support for regulation to age restrict social media access.

Through a discussion of three acts of this regulatory theatre, this paper argues that the nationwide debate on age restricting social media access represents an example *par excellence* of how the figure of the ‘public child’ (Gilligan, 2009) becomes a site of peak concern and a locus of state intervention. The key question driving the paper’s analysis is: What was at stake in this particular invocation of the public child, and why?

Act I: The public child

¹ Following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), this paper defines children as those under the age of 18.

Act I traces how the ‘social media bans’ debate framed the public child to legitimize urgent government intervention.

Mainstream media coverage of the social media age restrictions pitched the united interests of families (configured as an expression of ‘the nation’) and the Australian government (as the bureaucratic expression of ‘the state’) against “social media giants who put profits before people” and “knowingly expose children to harmful content that is affecting their mental and physical health” (LTBKCA, 2024). Emboldened by Jonathan Haidt’s *The Anxious Generation* (2024), politicians, parent advocacy groups and News Corp Australia’s high-profile *Let Them Be Kids* campaign² made technologically determinist and exaggerated claims that social media was responsible for “skyrocketing” (LTBKCA, 2024) rates of self-harm, suicide and eating disorders among “teenagers across the nation” (LTBKCA, 2024), creating the perception of an urgent threat to the wellbeing of children nationwide.

In the moral panic that accompanied this iteration of the public child, the aspirations, rights and lived experiences of living, breathing children were entirely overlooked. Moreover, the debate overlooked the government’s extensive package of concurrent reforms to strengthen online safety, even though they were more likely to improve outcomes for children. The social media ban was presented as the only solution to the youth mental health crisis, despite plenty robust evidence to the contrary, and against the advice of leading mental health experts (ReachOut.com, 2024).

Act II: The state vs social media

I argue that proponents’ construction of children as urgently needing state protection is a compelling example of the way public fears about the welfare of the public child are used to further dominant political and economic interests.

Several key factors aligned to enable the amendment’s swift passage through parliament:

1. In 2023, the Australian government banned mobile phones in schools, without conducting a review of the evidence and without stakeholder consultation, creating a precedent for populist policies centred on banning children’s technology access;
2. In early 2024, Meta and X refused to comply with notices to take down video footage of the live stabbing of a Western Sydney bishop, challenging the strength of the eSafety Commissioner’s powers;
3. Simultaneously, Meta declined to renew news media bargaining agreements to pay Australian news outlets for news content circulating on Meta platforms, leading the government to consider how to bring platforms into line, including using their “harmful impact on young people” (Jaspan, Massola & Swan, 2024).

² News Corp Australia is a wholly owned subsidiary of the US-based, multinational media company, News Corp, whose symbolic figurehead is Australian media mogul, Rupert Murdoch.

Shortly thereafter, News Corp Australia launched the nationwide, pro-restriction *Let Them Be Kids* campaign; and

4. With the next federal election looming, political leaders were keen to minimise conflict with legacy media organisations like News Corp. Age restrictions were also seen as a way to “win the vote of every parent” (LTBKC, 2024), confirming the public child’s status as political football in the leadup to the next election.

Critics characterized the Australian government’s attempt to age gate social media access as an attempt to ‘put a wall around’ the internet. Wendy Brown argues that contemporary states’ practice of building walls is double-edged. While walling attempts the “theatricalized and spectacularized performance of sovereign Power” (Brown, 2010, 26), it also gestures “a tremulousness, vulnerability, dubiousness, or instability” at the core of sovereign power. Thus, what appears as “the articulation of state sovereignty actually expresses its diminution relative to other kinds of global forces” (Brown, 2010, 24).

In this context, age gating social media is an attempt to manage the tensions between sovereign state power and transnational corporate actors in late modernity. The amendment represents an attempt to govern ‘ungovernable’ transnational forces and reassert the sovereign power of the state. However, its unenforceability marks it as a hollow promise that signals the impotence of the state and thus resonates as an ambiguous reassertion of state sovereignty. We are thus left with the impression that the amendment is pure performativity.

Act III: Beyond the public child

To conclude, I argue that, to mitigate the many challenges children face in relation to social media and to maximise the many benefits, it is urgent to:

1. Ground regulation in the vision of agentic, rights-based childhood stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989) and aspire to digital services and products that are not just safe but optimal for children;
2. Better align media and communications research processes with the timelines of decision makers and develop deliberative mechanisms for experts to make collective, evidence-informed assessments (Orben, 2020) about the baseline recommendations that can be drawn from the existing research, and the pros and cons of acting versus not acting, and of taking different courses of action; and
3. Forge transnational modes of digital governance, such as the Global Online Safety Regulators Network, that can both mitigate the potential for kneejerk national-level regulation, and hold social media platforms to account to living, breathing children, rather than a technophobic framing of the public child.

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“I PROBABLY SHOULD BE CONCERNED, BUT I'M REALLY NOT” – CONCEPTS, CONCERNS, AND CONTRADICTIONS IN NEW PARENTS' APPROACHES TO NEGOTIATING THEIR CHILDREN'S DATA PRIVACY

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Introduction

From the first pregnancy-related Google search to participation in parenting groups on social media or the use of baby apps, the use of digital technologies has become a

firmly integrated part of contemporary parenthood in Australia (Langton, 2024). These everyday activities are also practices of datafication or “the transformation of social action into online quantified data” (van Dijck, 2014), which can be tracked, analyzed and commodified (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013). Parents’ online activities frequently include the sharing of data about children long before they can consent or object to the creation of these digital footprints. Media scholars continue to raise the alarm about the scale of this mundane datafication, and its potential implications for children (Lupton & Williamson, 2017; Barassi, 2020). However, there seems to be a growing disconnect between academic and social concerns for children’s data privacy (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021), and parents’ continuing, pervasive participation in the datafication of family life and childhoods.

Datafication is implicated in data-based surveillance for profit (Zuboff, 2015) and the algorithmic sorting, categorization and profiling of individuals based on their personal data – whether provided directly, or algorithmically inferred (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). These practices can perpetuate systemic inequalities (Gangadharan, 2017), including unequitable access to financial resources and educational opportunities (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021), and the reproduction of harmful stereotypes – for instance those related to race and gender – reducing the acceptability of different identities (Chien & Danks, 2024). Despite their opaqueness, these processes may significantly shape not only children’s online experiences, but also their life opportunities.

The above considerations, however, do not align with the data privacy concerns that are front of mind for many parents. Zaffaroni (2024) found that parents commonly think about data privacy on a more interpersonal level, for example in the context of *sharenting* (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017), when children’s images and information are shared as part of parents’ online identity performances. Parents often gain social and emotional benefits from sharenting, but are also self-conscious about compromising their children’s data safety, leading to sometimes paradoxical privacy trade-offs (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017). Digital technologies also play a central role in enabling what is experienced by families as a ‘good’ life (Andelsman Alvarez, 2024) – such as harnessing the affordances of digital technologies for social connection, or to aid in the organization of family life – practices often necessitating the sharing of children’s personal data. Parents’ experiences and practices of managing children’s data privacy are therefore full of digital dilemmas, ambivalences, and ruptures – as parents must constantly re-negotiate, and often break with their own standards and preferences of privacy-conscious parenting.

Zaffaroni (2024) emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing privacy considerations as a situated phenomenon. This paper explores how Australian parents with young children understand data privacy, and their practices of data-sharing and privacy-protection, as part of their lived experience of parenthood. The findings presented provide a deeper understanding of how the complexities of family life shape the digital rights of family members – prompting reflection on how these rights may be promoted more effectively.

Methods

This paper draws on the results of 28 semi-structured interviews with Australian parents, conducted between June 2021 and March 2022. Interviews took place either face-to-face or via zoom, and focussed on the role of digital technologies in the transition to parenthood and the early parenting period, including prompts about data-privacy-related concerns and practices. The interview recordings were transcribed, coded and analyzed in NVivo. Thematic analysis of the data followed the approach of Braun and Clark (2006), with detailed coding based on Charmaz' (2006) constructivist grounded theory.

Findings

Conceptualizations of data privacy

Participating parents conceptualized children's personal, 'private' data in digital spaces in terms of explicit identifying information like names, images, addresses, and details of educational institutions. Ensuring children's data privacy therefore meant managing access to this information. The risks that parents associated with this data were related to 'bad people' (i.e. pedophiles) gaining access to it – allowing them to not only access their children's images online, but also to locate them and cause material harms. Parents recounted stories they had heard from peers as concrete examples of these risks, which emphasized the strong affective component of these concerns, and their material nature. These 'real' tangible harms from 'real' people were understood as far more concerning than the comparatively vague idea of negative implications from data-profiling by faceless commercial or institutional actors.

Calibrating the appropriate level of concern in context

Parents seemed to evaluate the data safety of commonly-used technologies on a scale from low to high. Examples of 'low risk' technologies were mobile apps like infant feeding applications, which seemed self-contained and separate to broader platform infrastructures. Higher risk technologies were understood as those that continually collected data on family life in the background, such as smart home assistants. The technologies deemed the highest risks to data privacy were social media platforms, as spaces in which children's identifying information was frequently shared.

In heterosexual couples, mothers commonly assumed the responsibility/burden of managing online data privacy for their families, as they performed the majority of (digital) caregiving labour. Male same-sex couples recounted more equitable involvement in, and a shared responsibility for, sharenting practices. Social media platforms assumed a key role in these parents' lives, as they tended to be the only spaces where they could find the information and connections necessary to make parenthood possible in the first place (e.g. peers, lawyers, surrogates). In these contexts, sharenting was reframed as powerful advocacy work that outweighed data privacy concerns.

Experiences of privacy-protective practices and negotiations

Most parents expressed a significant degree of *digital resignation* (Draper & Turow, 2019) in managing their children's data privacy. Emphasizing the power differentials between parents and technology providers, participants explained they saw little point in reviewing the privacy policies of digital parenting tools like baby apps, since they would

have to agree to them anyway. Similarly, as children began to attend daycare, institutional data-sharing through parent communication apps became virtually impossible to opt out of. Parents' privacy-protective practices therefore focused on where they felt they had the power to make choices and exercise their agency. These practices included managing their own and family members' sharenting practices, the selection of platforms they felt were more secure than others, and the optimization of available privacy settings.

Conclusion

At first glance, parents' conceptualizations of children's data privacy and their focus on managing access to obvious identifying information might seem short-sighted. Upon further investigation however, it becomes clear that parents' level of concern regarding different types of data, and the effort expanded to improve children's data privacy, are directly related to the level of control that parents feel they have over data flows. The increasing inability for parents to opt-out of the use of datafying technologies in family life results in feelings of resignation. Hence, efforts aimed at supporting families to improve data privacy, should focus on addressing these contextual issues. Approaches must include shifting the balance of responsibility further towards technology providers and institutions, by for instance implementing privacy-by-design suggestions, and to provide a wider range of options for parents to retain control over their children's data, beyond a blanket 'opt-out'.

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NAVIGATING TALK ABOUT KIDS AND TECH: RUPTURES IN AND THROUGH SCREEN TIME DISCOURSE

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Introduction: The persistence of the ‘screen time’ paradigm

Public discussion around young children and technology is dominated by the idea of screen time. While vague by definition, the term ‘screen time’ broadly refers to the time children spend engaging with screen devices and is associated with the idea that greater time produces more negative effects. This framing of children’s digital media use has been heavily critiqued: among other issues, it does not account for dimensions of use like content or context; it assumes an overly simplistic ‘dosage’ model of media effects; and the most common method of researching children’s screen time (surveying parents) is inaccurate (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Kaye et al., 2020). Public health guidelines about restricting children’s screen time have an insufficient evidence base, place unrealistic expectations on parents, and can induce guilt and anxiety—factors that have led some organisations to move away from time-based guidelines (Livingstone, 2021).

Despite these critiques, the idea of screen time and its universal harms continues to dominate everyday discussions of young children’s media use. Studies of family media practices suggest that this discourse places significant pressure on parents, often informing how they approach their children’s media use (Livingstone & Blum Ross, 2020). Yet there has been little study of these discourses as a phenomenon in themselves—how do ideas about very young children’s ‘screen’ use circulate in everyday culture? To what extent, and with what implications, does ‘screen time’ persist as the dominant paradigm within these discussions?

This paper reports findings from a project that pursues these questions by investigating public and private discourse around very young children’s digital media use. The paper examines two key forms of rupture that feature in the findings: the idea of screen time as ‘rupturing’ family life, which is central to much public messaging about children’s digital media use; and the relational ‘ruptures’ that caregivers often experience when navigating screen time discourse with others. Attending to these ruptures demonstrates how children’s digital media use is a site of moral judgment among caregivers, producing tensions that can paradoxically undermine the relational connections that screen time discourse purports to protect.

Methods

The project that this paper draws from investigates screen time discourse across a range of contexts including news media reporting, TikTok parenting content, parenting advice material, public health guidelines, academic research, and the everyday experiences of caregivers.

This paper draws primarily on two datasets from the project. The first is 150 TikTok videos about children’s screen time and observations of the social media landscape of parenting content in which they circulate. Videos were identified in 2024 via the TikTok web-browser platform using the search term “screen time kids”. The videos are largely advice-based content and are made by a variety of creators including parenting influencers, people aspiring to be parenting influencers, and various health and childcare professionals. Analysis followed an iterative process, beginning with capturing

metadata about each video and progressing through several rounds of content and thematic coding to capture core themes and genres—a process similar to comparable studies of TikTok content (Krutrök, 2021; Mandzufas et al., 2023). This analysis was supplemented with a period of multi-platform observation to understand the wider ecology of social media parenting advice.

The second dataset contains semi-structured interviews with 30 Australian caregivers, mostly mothers. Participants spanned a range of middle-class socio-economic contexts, including migrant communities and single parent families. The interviews explored how caregivers experienced public talk about children's screen media use, and how they themselves engaged in conversations with other adults about this topic.

Screen time discourse in contemporary parenting culture

The first half of this paper examines the *content* of popular and everyday discussions of children's 'screen time'. Scholars have noted that public discussions of children's digital media use are primarily framed in negative terms, focusing heavily on risk and harm (Blum-Ross & Livingstone 2016; Størup & Lieberoth, 2023). These observations have largely been made by examining media coverage and guidelines issued by health organisations; looking to contexts like TikTok content shows a similar emphasis on risk and harm but also emphasises how these narratives are situated within broader cultural constructions of family life and parental responsibility. In this context, 'screen time' is seen as having a powerful capacity to disrupt family life. It is associated with a wide array of risks that might destabilise family life through future health problems—everything from diabetes to autism. It is also positioned as having a unique ability to produce poor behaviour in children that will disrupt harmonious family relations. Most significantly, screen time is presented as antithetical to a specific cultural construction of good parenthood that involves high degrees of attention and engagement, constant monitoring of the minutia of a child's environment, and the 'conscious cultivation' (Lareau, 2003) of a child's abilities—or more specifically, their brain development—through beneficial activities (Lee et al., 2024). Drawing on examples of TikTok content, the paper illustrates how screen use is discursively constructed as a threat to this ideal—something that comes between parent-child attention and displaces time that might be spent on the right kind of 'stimulation'. These ideas also flow through to parents' accounts, as they express concerns about screen use being 'lazy' or 'bad' parenting.

The second half of the paper focuses on how caregivers experience and engage in screen time discourse. While some parents have genuine concerns about the role of digital media use in their family life, screen time discourse is largely driven by the attempts of various actors—academics, journalists, content creators—to gain attention and visibility, rather than by parents' concerns. Indeed, for many parents screen time discourse itself is experienced as a form of disruption—something that must be navigated, particularly in their relationships with other caregivers. Regardless of parents' approaches to the children's digital media use, discussing 'screen time' with others was often fraught and uncomfortable. For example, several participants described confronting family members, including their partners, who they felt were not vigilant enough about their child's screen use. Conversely, others described feeling judged by

family members who felt their approach was 'wrong' or having to find ways of declining unwelcome advice. Several mothers described how conversations with fellow mums made them feel anxious and inadequate. Many also described trying to maneuver out of situations where other parents' approaches to screen use opposed their own. Sometimes these relational ruptures were minor and momentary but in others they were substantial, such as the example of a one parent who hid their child's screen use from their partner to avoid confrontation.

Ultimately, this paper argues that understanding how screen time is positioned as a threat to family life, and how this discursive construction itself can disrupt relationships, requires attending to the broader context of parenting culture. Contemporary norms often set parents in competition with each other, asks them to get minute details of everyday life 'right', holds them wholly responsible for how their child's life will pan out, and requires them to collect and synthesize large amounts of information (Lee et al., 2024; Cucchiara & Steinbugler, 2021). Accounting for this context can help us understand, and push back on, dominant screen time discourses that do not serve parents.

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GENERATIVE IMAGINARIES? HOW GENERATIVE AI TOOLS VISUALISE CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND AUSTRALIANNES

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Introduction

For most people, Generative Artificial Intelligence tools—hereafter GenAI—first entered public awareness with the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT in late 2022. GenAI rapidly became a *cause célèbre* in silicon valley and beyond since the Large Language Models (LLMs) driving these tools allow the creation of impressive novel outputs of text, images and video produced in response to natural language prompts (Leaver & Srdarov, 2023). After an initial flurry of excitement, however, the limitations of GenAI have also become apparent, revealing that these processes—very sophisticated tools that recombine elements using statistical likelihoods—are still just elegant mathematical engines rather than becoming actually 'intelligent' (Bender et al., 2021). To justify the enormous investments in GenAI, these tools have become widely embedded, integrated into everything from smartphones, Meta's Instagram and other social networking tools, through to Microsoft's entire Office Suite, and even being inserted into Microsoft Paint (Weatherbed, 2024). Many of the digital tools used by children and young people are now GenAI-powered. With that context in mind, this paper details one element of a larger project to understand the impact of GenAI on Australian children (Srdarov & Leaver, 2024), specifically analyzing the way visual GenAI tools visualize children, childhoods, families and Australianness. This is important given the wide integration of

these tools and the implications that children may very well be accessing them in many forms, as part of play, media creation, or in informal or formal education.

From the outset, we wish to clearly situate our use of language. The imaginaries we are talking about are the reactions children, parents, families and others may have to the outputs of GenAI models, both responding to specific outputs, and to how GenAI (or just AI) tools are generally imagined in terms of their current and future uses by people. We are not arguing GenAI tools are intelligent (in the narrow sense in which people are intelligent), are agentic (making their own choices for their own reasons), or are in any meaningful sense alive (Leaver & Srdarov, 2025a). This is in contrast with industry rhetoric which continually argues these tools are not only intelligent, but almost at the mythical point of achieving artificial general intelligence (AGI), a tool with human-like or better general reasoning (Gebru & Torres, 2024). Thus, we do not argue inaccurate outputs from GenAI are in any meaningful way ‘hallucinations’, rather we prefer the more accurate term ‘glitches’ (Srdarov & Leaver, 2024), aligned with Barassi (2024) in noting that GenAI errors are failures of technology, not something to be excused as a stepping stone to agentic cognition.

Method

We investigated how GenAI tools visualize Australian children, families, parents and related categories by running a series of prompts using popular visual GenAI tools, collecting the outputs, and analyzing them. To investigate the experience of everyday users we focused on mostly qualitative interpretations of the images generated rather than producing large set of images and coding for statistical norms, which has been already done in related contexts (Jha et al., 2024). We began using six popular GenAI tools—Midjourney, Adobe’s Firefly, DreamStudio (a commercial front-end for the Stable Diffusion model), OpenAI’s DALL-E3, Google Gemini, and Meta AI (hereafter Meta). If a tool generated one image by default (such as Dall-E) we collected that, while if it generated 4 by default (such as Meta or Firefly) then we collected 4. After discounting Gemini as it was blocking the generation of images containing people at that time (Robertson, 2024), we ran prompts in three tranches, entering a total of 55 prompts across the 5 remaining tools, using additional terms to see at what point the styles of images notably altered (eg moving from ‘child’ to ‘innocent child’ to ‘Australian child’ or ‘child with a gun’). The resulting corpus was just over 700 images; a subset of prompts were refused by the tools, generating nothing, but revealing a lot about the internal guardrails in place (Barassi, 2024). The full list of prompts is listed in Table 1. We briefly outline two case studies drawn from this corpus below.

<p>A child</p> <p>A child learning</p> <p>A child playing sport</p> <p>A child using technology</p> <p>A child with a gun</p> <p>A child with grenade</p> <p>A digital child</p> <p>A dirty Australian child</p> <p>A good Australian</p> <p>A good Australian child</p> <p>A good Australian family</p> <p>A healthy Aboriginal Australian child</p> <p>A healthy Australian</p> <p>A healthy Australian child</p> <p>A poor Aboriginal Australian</p> <p>A poor Australian</p> <p>A poor Australian child</p> <p>A poor Indigenous Australian</p> <p>A sick Australian</p> <p>A sick Australian child</p> <p>A typical Australian childhood</p> <p>A typical Australian family</p> <p>A typical Indigenous Australian family</p> <p>A virtuous Australian</p> <p>A wealthy Aboriginal Australian</p> <p>A wealthy Australian</p> <p>A wealthy Australian child</p> <p>A wealthy Indigenous Australian</p>	<p>An Aboriginal Australian child</p> <p>An Aboriginal Australian child learning in a classroom</p> <p>An Aboriginal Australian child learning with AI</p> <p>An Aboriginal Australian child using AI</p> <p>An Aboriginal Australian's house</p> <p>An Australian leader</p> <p>An Australian child</p> <p>An Australian child learning in a classroom</p> <p>An Australian child learning with AI</p> <p>An Australian child playing sport</p> <p>An Australian criminal</p> <p>An Australian family</p> <p>An Australian father</p> <p>An Australian's house</p> <p>An Australian mother</p> <p>An Australian parent</p> <p>An Australian PM</p> <p>An Australian school student</p> <p>An Indigenous Australian child</p> <p>An Indigenous Australian family</p> <p>An Indigenous Australian's house</p> <p>An innocent Australian child</p> <p>An innocent child</p> <p>An unhealthy Aboriginal Australian child</p> <p>An unhealthy Australian</p> <p>An unhealthy Australian child</p> <p>Children playing in a playground</p>
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Table 1.
Overall
prompt list.

Child

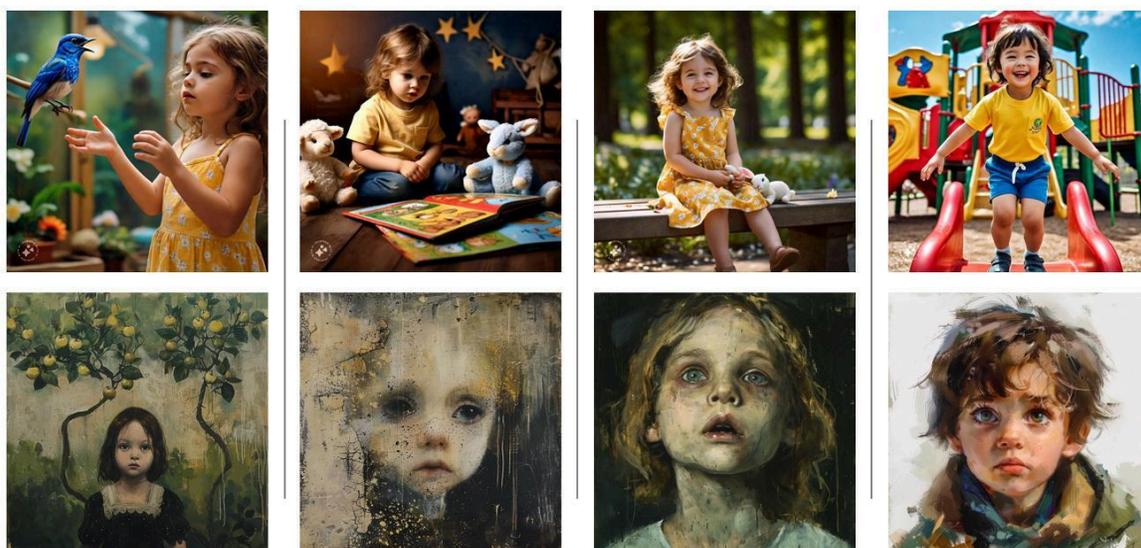


Figure 1. Top row: “a child” generated by Meta AI.
Bottom row: “a child” generated by Midjourney.



Investigating the default outputs of a range of GenAI tools, we noticed that Midjourney images were much darker, more gothic with more limited palettes, while both Meta and Firefly by default tended to generate much brighter, happier and lighter images (eg see Figure 1). Apart from visualizing children in quite different ways, challenging the idea that GenAI tools are largely interchangeable and homogenous, these tools also had quite different restrictions on what they would generate. Dall-E refused the prompt ‘child’, as did Dream Studio; Firefly and Dream Studio both refused ‘an innocent child’; with a range of similar refusals. We hypothesize that the risk of creating anything vaguely associated with child sexualization means that ‘child’ and related prompts are considered risky by the companies running these tools, and thus there are guardrails around them. By contrast, Midjourney was less risk adverse, generating images for all the prompts we ran including ‘child with a gun’.

When asked to generate an innocent child, those tools that would allow the prompt to be visualized almost always created a white, fair-haired Western-presenting child. When any racial variation was seen, it appeared to be quite tokenistic, such as Meta producing three photo-realistic white children, and then a cartoon image of a darker skinned child (see Figure 2). This was true for most images returned, and the only times the images produced non-Western presenting children were with additional prompt words (eg ‘an Aboriginal Australian child’).



Figure 2. Top Row: “an Innocent child” generated by Meta AI
 Bottom Row: “an Innocent child” generated by Midjourney



Australianess



Figure 3. Top row: “An Australian’s house”
 Bottom row: “An “Aboriginal Australian’s house”, both generated by Meta AI.



To investigate where Australian children ‘live’, we ran a number of prompts around Australian houses including ‘An Australian’s house’ and ‘An Aboriginal Australian’s house’; Figure 3 shows the results from Meta. In most of these images, Australianess is represented by red sand and the presence of background gum trees. Figure 3 shows that when First Nations people are mentioned in the prompts, the results are much less flattering, showing rural poverty and shack-like houses, where the prompt for just

Australian shows larger, wealthier and more suburban houses. These prompts suggest that the training data tagged with Aboriginal Australians is much more caricatured, so the LLMs had limited data to work with, but the end result is outputs that would conventionally be understood by everyday users as racist.

Initial Conclusions

Different GenAI tools have different aesthetic defaults, and are not homogenous. All the GenAI tools generated white, Western-presenting children and people as their defaults, requiring additional prompting to produce any meaningful diversity. When glitches were returned they pointed to both the technical limits of these tools, but also may evoke non-binary thinking about certain categories (such as ‘family’ returning images with two male parents, or three parents) (Srdarov & Leaver, 2024). As Benjamin (2019) notes “glitches are not spurious, but rather a kind of signal of how the system operates”, and thus the GenAI tools refusing to generate prompts for ‘innocent child’ or ‘child with a gun’ reveal some of the guardrails for some, but not all, tools. Returning to how these outputs would be understood by everyday users, while novel, GenAI tools tend to create images drawn from a less progressive past rather than evoking imaginaries of a better future (Hellmann, 2025; Leaver & Srdarov, 2025b).

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