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## Online Age Checks Now Mandatory Under UK's New Digital Safety Rules

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A new law in the United Kingdom has come into effect, requiring websites to verify that users are over 18, using stricter age-check systems that go far beyond just entering a birthday. The *Online Safety Act*, passed to protect minors from harmful online content, now requires social networks and adult sites to implement more secure verification methods, such as uploading photo IDs or utilizing facial recognition technology.

The *Online Safety Act*, designed to reduce children's exposure to explicit and damaging content, targets platforms that host adult material or content related to self-harm, eating

disorders, and suicide. It follows findings from the UK's media regulator, the *Office of Communications (Ofcom)*, which revealed that 8% of children aged 8 to 14 had accessed pornography online in just one month, including children as young as eight. Ofcom noted that "until now, it's been too easy for children to see harmful content, including pornography online," underscoring the urgency for effective safeguards.

Under the new law, platforms have flexibility in choosing how to verify users' ages, though they must ensure the systems are robust and privacy-respecting. For instance, Reddit now prompts users to confirm their age even outside of 18+ content areas. After entering a birthdate, users must submit either a government-issued ID, such as a passport or a UK driving licence, or complete a facial verification process by recording a short video, where the user turns their head to confirm it's not a static image. This method proved effective even when someone attempted to cheat using celebrity photos or pictures of relatives.

Social media site *Bluesky* is also complying, requiring users to confirm their age before they can access adult content or use direct messaging. The platform uses *KWS (Kids Web Services)* for verification, which can either match a user's face or confirm a credit card from providers such as Visa, Mastercard, or American Express. While facial verification posed technical difficulties for some users, one test took over 30 tries before failing; the credit card method worked in under half a minute.

The adult content industry has responded in varied ways. *Pornhub*, owned by parent company *Aylo*, now requires users to log in via Google, X (formerly Twitter), or by creating an account directly. In contrast to its withdrawal from France over similar laws, *Aylo* has endorsed the UK's approach. In a statement, *Aylo*'s *Vice President of Brand and Community*, Alex Kekesi, said, "Ofcom's model is the most robust in terms of actual and meaningful protection we've seen to date," adding that protecting minors should be a shared responsibility involving governments, tech firms, and adults alike.

Other adult sites are implementing comparable measures. *xHamster* now requires users to log in via Google or X, although it confusingly continues to use Twitter's old branding. Meanwhile, *XVideos* remains accessible without age checks, though the site warns that it may be forced to comply. Its parent company, *WGCZ Holdings*, has published a blog post criticizing the law, arguing that mandatory verification could drive away most of its users.

The UK's move to enforce online age checks marks a shift in how governments can and likely will influence digital access. As age verification becomes the norm, websites failing to

comply may face increasing scrutiny, while others that embrace these changes could set a precedent for responsible, child-safe internet practices.