

Beyond Roblox: Why Singapore's new app store rules offer some relief for parents

Safety by design must be a core tenet of a digital world backed by legal protection and concrete penalties.

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Singapore is one of the safest cities in the world – until children pick up their smartphones and enter different realities. Today, the smartphone in your child's pocket is no longer just a tool for connection. It is a portal to a largely unregulated wild west, leaving parents and authorities around the world scrambling to mitigate evolving risks.

Since April, Singapore has extended its approach beyond tackling the risks of key social media platforms, to holding gateways themselves responsible. Under IMDA's Code of Practice for App Distribution Services, app stores including Apple App Store, Google Play Store, Huawei AppGallery, Samsung Galaxy Store and Microsoft Store will be required to integrate age assurance measures, to prevent children under 18 from downloading apps meant for adults and to restrict their access to potentially harmful content.

This change reflects a shift in perception of where responsibility lies in child protection and how governments think about online safety. The need for this shift is clear from what is happening globally. In the US, gaming platform Roblox agreed in April to a US\$12 million (\$S15.3 million) settlement with the state of Nevada over allegations that it prioritised growth over safeguards for young users against child sexual exploitation. More than a hundred similar lawsuits against the platform remain pending.

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media, but neither is it just a game. Its mix of user-generated content, social interaction and immersive play creates risks that can rival or even exceed those on social media platforms.

Grooming cases have reportedly begun in-game on Roblox, with predators using interactions as a precursor to in-person contact. In the UK, a man who groomed a 14-year-old girl he first met on Roblox has recently been jailed for encouraging her to share intimate images with him and to engage in sexualised conversations.

The dangers on a platform such as Roblox are further amplified because of how easy it is for users to create and share games with others on the platform, allowing

new users to gain access to unfiltered experiences. Terrorist and extremist groups are known to target youth through games and online discussion groups. In 2023, two Singaporean teenagers who were self-radicalised online were issued orders under the Internal Security Act.

Regulators have been trying to play catch up, with mixed results. Australia, after proposing a social media ban for those under 16, has turned its attention directly to Roblox, threatening fines that prompted the company to announce changes such as limiting chats for young children to prevent exposure to predators, as well as to provide parents with more visibility over their activities on the platform.

In Europe, authorities are considering whether to classify Roblox as a "Very Large Online Platform" under the Digital Services Act, which would subject it to stricter obligations including requirements on risk assessments, mitigation reporting and protections for minors, which are similar to those major social media platforms are subject to. Singapore's approach aims to stay ahead of the regulatory curve. Rather than targeting only designated platforms, the IMDA Code shifts intervention upstream to app distribution services, the main entry point to the digital ecosystem. Non-compliance can carry fines of up to \$1 million.

Although the sum is nominal for social media giants, these new

rules effectively change incentives across the ecosystem. App stores are expected to enforce standards. App developers, in turn, must comply if they want access to the Singapore market.

While age assurance is not an impenetrable shield – given that determined users will find workarounds – it introduces the friction necessary to deter casual access to harmful content. At the point of download, younger users under 18 years of age in Singapore will be deterred from accessing apps meant for adults. Singapore is making app stores play the role of gatekeepers, by adding one more layer of enforcement and mandating that apps cannot fail to comply with standards required for online safety, simply

because they fall outside the traditional remit of regulation.

Beyond age assurance measures, under the IMDA Code, app developers for apps which allow for user-generated content or experiences to be created must have measures in place to detect and remove harmful content, as well as an in-app channel for users to flag harmful content to the app developer.

The focus on functionality and what an app or platform actually allows users to do means that Singapore's more pre-emptive regulatory approach will be able to contain the next Roblox before it gains extensive reach and causes significant harm. App developers can less easily shirk responsibility for harmful outcomes arising from the design of their apps. They can no longer defend themselves by pushing the onus of keeping young users away on parents, as Roblox CEO Dave Baszucki tried to do in 2025.

The IMDA Code reflects the broader principle that is gaining traction internationally. Safety by design cannot remain a voluntary aspiration for app developers and platform owners, whose decisions are ultimately shaped by the number of downloads, user engagement time and profits. Safety by design instead must be a core tenet of a digital world backed by legal protection and concrete penalties.

Digital spaces are no longer peripheral to childhood but are parts of it. Since we cannot exclude children entirely from these digital environments, the burden of safety must shift to the architects who build these spaces and the gatekeepers who make such access available. The IMDA Code is a promising start, but it remains to be seen if the designated app stores will truly internalise their new responsibilities, and further how Singapore's regulatory approach will continue to evolve.

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