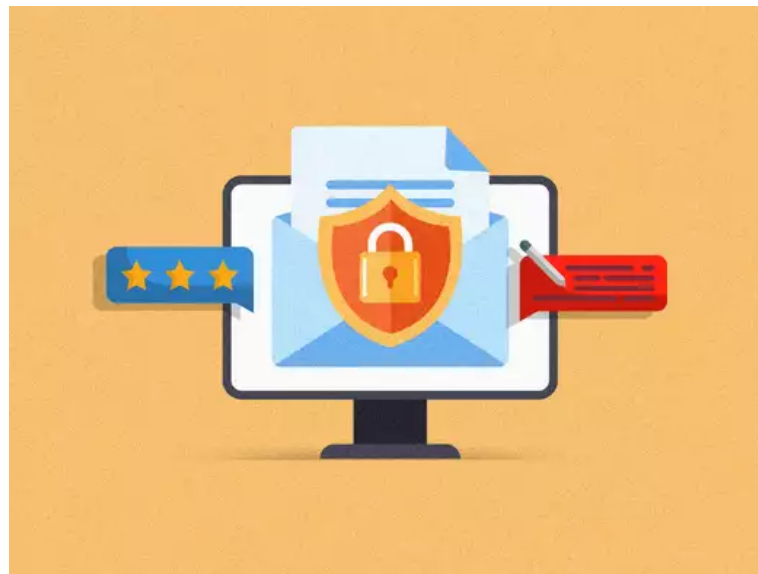


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From QR codes to tokens, firms parse ideas for age-gating



Synopsis

Many companies are also favouring a token-based mechanism - which is akin to tokenisation of credit cards - for obtaining verifiable parental consent.

A QR code that certifies whether a person is a minor or an adult, the virtual **Aadhaar** ID or combined age verification at the app store level are some of the measures that social media platforms are considering to verify the age of

users as mandated by the new Data Act.

This system must be implemented well, said executives, since it can otherwise turn into a security nightmare for citizens. Many companies are also favouring a token-based mechanism - which is akin to tokenisation of credit cards - for obtaining verifiable parental consent.

It would take significant investments for companies to reengineer their systems for this. Social media platforms whose users include children are worried of losing users, as these kids may no longer be able to use the platforms if parents refuse to give consent.

The government notified the **Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA)**, 2023 in August and asked social media platforms to submit suggestions on the best possible ways for implementing child gating.

Social media platforms whose users include children are worried about losing users, as these kids may no longer be able to use the platforms if the parent refuses to give consent

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An industry executive said the law doesn't mandate people to reveal their age; it only asks them to certify whether they are a minor or above 18 years of age. In that case, an Aadhaar-based QR code, which certifies whether a person is a minor or major, can be scanned and used for age verification without collecting too much information. "This will also align well with the data minimisation approach of the Act," the person added.

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Under the law, personal data of children under the age of 18 can be processed only after obtaining verifiable consent from parents or legal guardians and this entails establishing the age of the child, and the relationship between the parent and the child.

Once provisions of the Act are implemented, India will join one of the few countries where one must be at least 18 years old for using social media platforms without parental consent.

Industry stakeholders ET spoke with said they are still waiting for "more details" from the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology on how they would want companies to implement the age-verification and verifiable parental consent clauses of the DPDPA. "Several solutions have already been presented with

strengths and weaknesses,” one of them said.

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"We will store a digitally signed undertaking along with registration for new users on our platform, which is a 'consent token' stored against that user," an industry executive said, who did not wish to be named.

"This will be one additional field along with basic subscriber information that we store," he said, explaining the concept of the 'consent token', which is one of the verifiable parental consent mechanisms that are being explored.

“A QR code generated by an authority like the **Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI)** can say whether an individual is a minor or an adult,” the executive explained.

The virtual ID by UIDAI is another privacy

enhancing technology, the executive pointed out. “Lot of thinking is happening at a rough level but unless we have details on the DPDPA Rules, we can’t say,” he said.

Virtual ID or VID is a temporary, revocable 16-digit random number mapped with the Aadhaar number. VID can be used in lieu of Aadhaar number whenever authentication or e-KYC services are performed.

“Another solution that many are weighing in on is whether we can have a systemic solution. For example, at the app store level itself some kind of industry standard can emerge where all regulated entities are able to do age verification,” the executive quoted above said.

Since most social media apps are used on a mobile device, the industry executive suggested the age-gating to begin from either the operating system, the telecom operator or at the app store level.

“Almost any service that depends on a mobile phone number, is dependent on the telecom provider for that KYC. So, is that a starting point for age verification or obtaining parental consent? Is the OS a starting point? Is the app store a starting point,” he asked.

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Another industry source requesting anonymity said, “Most stakeholders seem to be leaning towards a token-based mechanism for obtaining verifiable parental consent. However, it would take investment worth crores for companies to reengineer their internal systems and implement the same.”

Sources aware of homegrown social media platform Koo’s thinking on the matter told ET that it had done voluntary self-verification using Aadhaar in the past.

“Can that kind of verification be done for children or for getting parental consent for children? We think that is possible. It is just about finding the right resources and plugging them in,” a source said.

‘Nobody has parent-child mapping’

Among the challenges that firms are facing include establishing the parent-child relationship.

“Almost nobody seems to have this mapping, whether it is DigiLocker or Aadhaar. Nobody has the hierarchical mapping between a parent and a child. It is almost as if the government is hoping that a new ecosystem of ID service providers will emerge where they have mapping,” the first industry executive said.

Hospitals, schools, and school boards could be a source of such mapping, he pointed out.

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“We have been at the receiving end of a request to come up with a standardised solution that all can adopt simultaneously, so that the risk is much less. It’s an ask from the government. The challenge, however, is we don’t see any provider that has the mapping. So, we’re stuck. Nobody has the mapping,” he said.

Age verification solutions often give rise to concerns regarding privacy and cybersecurity. As a result, it is imperative to adopt a risk-based approach as the cornerstone of these solutions to effectively strike a balance between security and privacy, said Ibrahim Khatri, founding chief executive of PrivEzi Solutions, a provider of data privacy solutions for the enterprise space.

Some age assurance systems tend to be

excessively surveillant, necessitating additional measures to ensure compliance with rules, he said. Regular audits conducted by the Data Protection Board are pivotal to ensure adherence to regulatory requirements, he added.

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