YOUNGMiNDS

Putting a stop to the endless scroll

How the Online Safety Bill can protect young people's mental health

January 2023

Contents

Executive summary

The online world is a big part of young people's lives. It is a space that offers them the opportunity to connect with like-minded people, explore their favourite topics and learn about the world. Yet, these benefits come with risks, and for too many young people, a price: the proliferation of content that damages young people's mental health, algorithms that think faster than users and a series of other factors that have been linked to poor wellbeing.

This report sheds a light on what young people really think about the online world. With parliamentary business resuming, the media spotlight is back on the Online Safety Bill: this report aims to provide information that will cut through the now-tired political rhetoric, and remind decision-makers what it means to safeguard a young person's mental health online. Our findings show that what young people really need to see change is the assumption that harm begins and ends with content alone. The reality is far from it.

Our research found that the aspects of the online world that caused the most concern among young people were:

- **The design of social media sites and platforms**, including the existence and capabilities of image-editing tools and algorithms

- **The insufficient education they receive** to get the skills to navigate a world in which they feel responsible for their own safety

- **A lack of consultation regarding the changes being made to the online world**, of which they make up a considerable user base

With the link between mental health and social media use becoming clearer, the online world is now a public health issue. The Online Safety Bill presents an opportunity to put in place measures that will target the areas young people themselves have highlighted. This report provides recommendations which, if taken forward in the Bill, will help make the most of this opportunity to effect real change.

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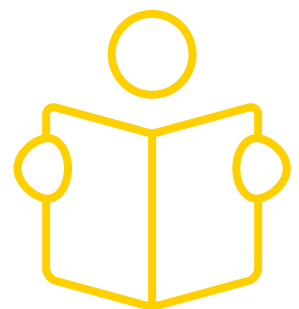
Introduction

Social media is an important space for young people. It is where they gather to socialise, share information, learn and explore. Yet it is still a space that has been primarily built by, and for, adults. It offers so many opportunities but is snared with risk, especially for the most vulnerable.

With 66% of young people reporting that social media negatively affects their mental health, it is right that policy-makers are asking how we can make online spaces safer for them.[1] However, amongst these debates about the impact of social media on their mental health, too little thought is given to how young people actually experience social media, and what needs to be put in place to enhance the positive experiences and minimise the negative.

To address this, YoungMinds carried out in-depth research to ask young people how they experience the online world, and what impact it has on their mental health. Their answer was clear: young people feel responsible for keeping their mental health safe online, but do not feel as if they have any control over their online experiences. 80% of young people told us they wanted to leave social media to look after their wellbeing but felt unable to, and many shared words of caution' when asked what they would tell a young person going online for the first time.[2] Although young people see the positives of social media, it is clear these platforms are not entirely built with the intention of giving young people positive experiences.

66%

of young people reported that social media negatively affects their mental health

The following report is a deep dive into our research findings, and analyses the impact of previously overlooked aspects of the online world. Throughout our research, young people highlighted the importance of nuance in assessments of the online world. The following report will present evidence which shows social media platforms and online spaces offer benefits as well as risks – 32% of young people take part in supportive conversations about mental health once a week; that age is not the only factor to be considered when distinguishing what is appropriate for different groups of young people – we surveyed young people up until the age of 25, and our results show the risks do not disappear upon turning 18; and that 'harm' itself has a threshold that varies from person to person.[3]

These are important points that have largely been missing from the Online Safety Bill discussions. The discussions have largely focused on risk in relation to content – for example, the role of the Bill in regulating 'harmful' content and the use of algorithms to promote harmful content.[4] Even when discussing the link between social media and body image, the rhetoric has focused on the proliferation of digitally altered images, rather than how easy it is for a young person to access the tools that would allow them to alter their own image.[5] This report aims to address these political blind-spots and show that what is actually needed, is the restoration of certain principles: that young users are not responsible for the harms they experience as a result of existing in a world primarily built by, and for, adults.

While this research aimed to look specifically at the potential for reform to social media posed by the Online Safety Bill, it also shed light on young people's experiences and opinions related to the internet more broadly. It highlighted a number of key principles for legislating the internet, which YoungMinds hope to see applied beyond the current Bill. These principles are:

1. **Control** – Young people must be given the tools to control how, where and when they are online, and what and with whom their online experiences are, without relying on third parties.

2. **Education** – Young people must be given the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions about how they use online platforms.

3. **Participation** – Young people must be consulted on the design of the online world, particularly given they tend to operate at its cutting edge.

4. **Flexibility** – The tools, information and provisions to give young people a voice when navigating the online world must be future-proof and have the capacity to adapt to the rapidly evolving online world; we cannot rely on the legislative process to be agile enough to re-legislate at the same rate that internet platforms and uses change.

These principles are reflected throughout this report, and also within our recommendations for the Bill itself, but are all too easily lost in the legislative process and political debates sparked by the regulation of online spaces.

If taken forward, our recommended changes to the Bill will provide solutions to the problems young people face online, even if those issues have not yet been given space in political discussion. The Bill must place responsibility for the impact of social media platforms on young people back in the hands of those

32%
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Key principles:

Control

Education

Participation

Flexibility

who have thus far made all the decisions leading up to this point: social media companies, and the Government.

There is no 'silver bullet' to address the risk the online world poses to young people's mental health.[6] Instead, there are numerous changes which, when made in conjunction with each other, should go a long way to restoring subjective wellbeing back to young people. We have outlined four key recommendations that will achieve these changes.

Key recommendations for the Online Safety Bill

Recommendation 1

Restructure the Bill around a duty of care towards the health and wellbeing of online service users, obliging online platforms to pay due regard to the mental health and wellbeing of all – and every – child and young person who uses their services.

Recommendation 2

The Bill must facilitate broader accountability and scrutiny by OfCom and other independent bodies, by a) obliging service providers to publish their child risk assessments, and give independent researchers access to relevant data, as required, to better facilitate broad scrutiny of compliance and b) obliging service providers to declare any changes being made to the function of their platforms, irrespective of whether these changes are required to be identified in their child risk assessment.

Recommendation 3

Reinstate and strengthen the clause that obliges the Government to provide relevant and effective media literacy education for children and young people. It should also ensure the design and implementation of effective education initiatives for children and young people to strengthen and future-proof their level of media literacy with regard to their use, behaviours and control over their online experiences.

Recommendation 4

The Bill must oblige the Government to undertake meaningful consultation of children and young people in the design, implementation and monitoring of the provisions set out in the Online Safety Bill and any subsequent secondary legislation to follow, by (but not limited to) the creation and involvement of a Youth Online Safety Advisory Committee.

To explain why each of these recommendations are necessary, this report will first establish some the context in which this discussion is taking place: what we know about mental health and the online world, and some of the known risks and opportunities already present. We will then explore the three key aspects of the online world that young people indicated in our research had the most influence over their mental health: the design of social media platforms, the provision for media literacy education, and greater youth participation in shaping the online world they inhabit, before outlining the role of social media companies in creating a truly safe online world.

Methodology

The purpose of our research was to find out how young people experience the online world, and how this impacts their mental health. Our aim was to distinguish between those elements of social media platforms that benefit mental health, and must therefore be protected and enhanced by any coming regulations, and those elements that risk causing harm to mental health.

We relied on three main data sources.

Online Safety Survey

The first part of our research was the Online Safety Survey completed by 1,453 young people in the UK aged 11-25.[7] This study was undertaken in 2022 and offers an up-to-date snapshot of children and young people's online lives in the months following the national COVID-19 lockdowns.

Qualitative workshops

The second part of our research was qualitative workshops which were designed to address the lack of qualitative data on how social media impacts young people's mental health.[8] The first workshop asked how participants defined and experienced 'harm' online. The second asked how supported young people felt offline to deal with the challenges of the online world. We also used these workshops to amplify the voices of the demographic groups we did not adequately reach in the survey. This included Black/African/Caribbean/Black British people (who represent 3.3% of the population but 1% of our survey respondents), as well as non-binary young people. We held two workshops with ten young people aged 17-24. Of these young people, two were from Black and racialised backgrounds, and three identified as non-binary.

Censuswide poll

Finally, our research was supplemented by a poll of 2,000 young people carried out by Censuswide for YoungMinds in early 2022.[9] In this poll we asked one multi-part question: 'how often do you experience the following on social media', giving a variety of positive and negative options such as 'taking part in unsupportive/damaging conversations about mental health' and 'being sent helpful content about mental health by peers'. The poll was nationally representative according to gender and found significant differences between males and females with males more likely to take part in damaging conversations, be sent unhelpful content or abusive messages.

1,453 young people took part in our Online Safety Survey

10 young people took place in two workshops

2,000 young people were polled on the multi-part question 'how often do you experience the following on social media...?'

Chapter 1: What do we know about mental health and the online world?

The online world is vast: encompassing gaming sites and consoles, search engines, advertising and areas of the internet offering content that is legal but nonetheless perceived by some as harmful, such as pornography. At YoungMinds, we chose to focus our research on social media platforms because young people routinely tell us social media use impacts their mental health.

Social media use and mental ill-health has become almost synonymous in the eyes of traditional media outlets, but the link is complex. Research to date has failed to establish a causal link between the two, but has unearthed an array of variables that influence the relationship between social media and mental health. This includes the volume of screen-time, types of platforms used, types of content encountered on those platforms and, importantly, who is encountering that particular content on that particular platform.[10]

Social media and inequalities

Many researchers agree that in order to understand young people in relation to the digital environment, offline factors must be included in assessing mental health risk factors. A landmark study found that found it was 'impossible to separate adolescents' online and offline experiences' because different young people engage with the online world in different ways according to their offline experiences.[11]

Social media use and mental ill-health has become almost synonymous in the eyes of traditional media outlets, but the link is complex

As a result, those with certain characteristics are more likely to access certain types of content or use social media in a certain way, which means the risk and benefit balance differs substantially from one young person to another.

That particular study found young people with pre-existing mental health conditions engaged with the online world in ways that exposed them to more content related to eating disorders and self-harm than their peers. This was found to be largely due to the communities these young people found online, and because the platforms offer these young people quick access to triggering content. The authors were clear that the operation of algorithms 'gamified or amplified' these mental health conditions in order to feed those users content, and keep them online for longer.[12] Troublingly, this can result in their vulnerability increasing if they are able to access this content in the midst of an escalation of their illness' symptoms. Indeed, if this content is 'gamified' as the authors attest, this downward spiral is a deliberate and desired outcome of the functioning of the platform.[13]

How other protected characteristics – such as disabilities, ethnicities, genders or other aspects of identity – are impacted by the operation of these algorithms has been identified as a substantial gap in the research to date.[14] While our research is a step towards addressing this gap, it is still an area that requires significant further investigation. YoungMinds would like to see provision made for this research in the future, and for the findings to be used to check the inclusivity of any regulatory measures being considered by policy-makers.

Locating 'harm'

There is a similar dearth of data related to how far specific types of legal content might be considered harmful, and might also be contributing to the onset of mental health conditions.

Despite numerous studies indicating that high screen-time impacts both the physical and mental health of young people, we can see from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology the dominance of the narrative that harms related to high levels of screen-time are limited to content, contact, conduct and commercial risks.[15] These categories locate harm from third parties, either businesses or other platform users. They fail, however, to facilitate adequate scrutiny of what causes such high levels of screen-time. The answer includes algorithms or automated decision making systems which have been floated by UNICEF as being both beneficial and hazardous to children.[16]

This oversight is not justified by research. After an NHS investigation found aspects of design were negatively affecting young people – some spent more time than they would choose online, and others found their mood was being influenced by the number of likes they were receiving – the 5Rights Foundation carried out a study of 21 young people and concluded that social media companies' business models curated online spaces that maximised the time, reach and activity across their services.[17] These design strategies influenced young people to use social media in ways that did not benefit their mental health.

5Rights identified a number of areas of concern with regards to design in their research, including image filters and image editing apps, as well as validation tools such as the 'like' button.[18] While the impact social media has on body image is an established phenomena, little information is available on whether body image is influenced negatively by the circulation of images themselves, or the way those images are produced and fed to users.[19] This report will later set out how our research found that the impact of design concerns on mental health, as flagged by 5Rights, actually exceed the risks posed by the mere circulation and passive consumption of doctored images alone.

When we return to the maxim that choice and control is a determinant of subjective mental health and wellbeing, it is clear that approaches to safeguarding young people's mental health online must identify where that choice is taken away from them, and put measures in place to reinstate control over their own online experiences.[20]

That young people feel that they do not have control over their experiences is well documented. The Mix found that 84% of young people were concerned about the way algorithms worked to serve them content, and a poll carried out for YoungMinds by Censuswide indicated that 42% of young people report displaying the early signs of addictive behaviour when using social media sites.[21] What has not yet been explored in depth is what young people themselves need to feel empowered online. YoungMinds' research, presented here, attempted to fill that knowledge gap, and found that young people need platform design and media literacy education to be improved, and to be able to participate more in developing the regulations that govern the online services they use every day.

Before examining our research findings, it is important to acknowledge that this research was carried out with the possibility of regulation of these technology platforms on the near horizon as the Online Safety Bill continues to make its way, albeit with delays, through Parliament. With alterations, the Bill presents a real opportunity to make the changes young people have told us will improve their mental health while they navigate the online world.

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The Online Safety Bill so far

The stated purpose of the Online Safety Bill is to make the UK the safest place to go online. The green paper was introduced under David Cameron's Government in 2017.[22] Four Prime Ministers later the Bill was finally introduced to the House of Commons in March 2022. The Bill of today retains the admirable aim to make the online world safe for all users, and YoungMinds welcomes it as an opportunity to put safeguarding measures in place to allow young people access to the benefits of the online world, without having to endure the current risks.

There is concern across the mental health and youth sectors that online safety may get lost in the political fallouts of this parliament. At the time of publication, work on the Bill has finally resumed after being delayed numerous times in response to the two Conservative leadership elections. Pressure is on for it to be passed before this parliamentary term comes to an end, as it cannot be passed over into the next one and risks being scrapped altogether.

It is important that the Bill passes, but also that it passes in a state that is fit to achieve its stated purpose.

The Bill itself has sparked debates about what legislated, safe online platforms actually look like, manifesting most obviously in the recent debate about the regulation of 'legal but harmful' content included in the Bill.[23] Investigations into what types of content have a greater impact on mental health outcomes are ongoing. Regarding the content types that are, on the face of it, harmful – eating disorder content, for example – researchers have been able to identify that a spectrum of harm exists but for the most part cannot agree on what is and is not substantively harmful.

There has been disquiet among some political factions and third sector organisations, that the Bill might disproportionately censor content and voices, as well as limit access to legal content which is deemed harmful. YoungMinds recognises the need to ensure that young people whose mental health might be harmed by certain content, are safe from exposure to that content. YoungMinds also recognises that what constitutes 'harm' is nuanced and varies from person to person. At the time of writing, the Bill is structured around three safety duties. There is no overarching risk assessment framework that would catch those harmful elements of online platforms which are not included in the content-specific safety duties. YoungMinds views this as a missed opportunity, and the findings to follow in this report will evidence why such a safety duty is necessary and practicable.

As work on the Online Safety Bill resumes, we encourage decision-makers to ask themselves what safeguarding mental health online actually looks like. We believe the current Bill is not up to scratch, failing to address one of the key risks to mental health – design risks – and failing to make sufficient provisions to ensure that online safety is a future-proofed reality for every young person. Taking a systemic approach to online safety, by regulating platform design, implementing fit for purpose media literacy initiatives, and improving youth participation in the monitoring and design of these regulations, will ensure that the necessary safeguards are in place. Preventing harm through content exposure should be a priority for the Bill, and we know that tackling content exposure through the regulation of site design will take steps towards this.

Young people tell us that they accept the argument that free speech needs to be protected. However they see the difference between free speech and being bombarded with harmful content they did not ask for by algorithms designed to keep them engaged. The best way to thread this needle is to give young people the tools and agency to curate their own social media experiences through platform design and education.

Chapter 2: How do young people experience the online world?

Before discussing the three themes that emerged most prominently in our research as areas of concern for young people, it is important to first map the online world as young people see it. What do young people do online, and how does it make them feel?

Pioneering online spaces

Young people are aware of emerging social media platforms early on and keen to try them out, meaning they are at the frontline of technological evolution. Text-heavy sites that were once the core of the social media world have fallen out of favour in these younger age-groups, with Facebook and Twitter being used by only 45% and 46% of survey respondents respectively.[24] Instead, the most popular social media platforms are heavily image- and video-centred': Instagram was the most popular platform at 99.3% uptake, followed by YouTube (86%); Snapchat (83%) and TikTok (81%).[25] Alongside these popular social media giants, young people are experimenting with newer social media apps and websites, such as Discord (used by 42% of survey respondents) and Twitch (used by 30%).[26] Discord is an instant messaging site similar to WhatsApp, and Twitch is another live streaming service, similar to the more popular video sharing apps.

Instagram has a

99.3%

uptake, followed by:

YouTube	86%
Snapchat	83%
TikTok	81%
Twitter	46%
Facebook	45%

It is clear that imagery, video and live broadcasting is more attractive to young people than earlier sites that allowed self-representation in more basic ways. Later, this report will detail how certain features of image and video sharing platforms can negatively impact the mental health of young people. That such a large proportion of them use such sites demonstrates the need to address those issues, as more young people are at risk.

The majority of new social media sites were discovered by young people after being recommended by their peers, making peer-to-peer influencing the most common factor determining the sites young people use.[27] One aspect of their interest in the new, is that young people told us that they trusted their peers more to listen to their worries or concerns about experiences they have online than they do the adults in their lives, because these adults often required context or explanations for their behaviour which a young person, who was also social media literate, would not need.[28]

The ease with which young people can discover and join new platforms is not concerning in itself. The issues arise when only some of those platforms have to adhere to rules that would reduce risks posed by all sites, as is the current plan under the draft Online Safety Bill. The mental health sector has repeatedly asked that all sites, irrespective of their size, should be subject to child safety duties.[29] Our research clearly demonstrates such calls are warranted.

A place to turn

In YoungMinds' 2022 survey, 79% of young people told us that they went on social media when they felt upset or stressed.[30] Evidently, a high number of young people who use the platform at any one time may be feeling vulnerable and provisions must be put in place to support them.

This statistic also reminds us that social media platforms offer an opportunity to make positive change in the lives of young people. If such a high proportion of young people go online when they are vulnerable, these platforms are potential sites of intervention which may be able to improve young people's wellbeing – that is, if they were able to access the benefits of them without encountering risk.

The majority engaged passively with content (72% scrolled through their feed), 'hoping to find a distraction or something that would cheer (them) up'.[31] 54% of those who went online when they were feeling vulnerable felt that it helped their mood, but a quarter said it did not.[32] If the majority of those logging on while feeling vulnerable are passive consumers of content, feeding healthy content and reducing exposure to more harmful topics might make a difference. Young people are choosing to enter a space that they know might offer help when they are feeling low, but they often are being failed by what they find.

Defining 'harm'

For young people, social media can influence them in a 'positive way … but if it didn't exist in any sort of way, life would be better'.[33] This sentiment was echoed across our research. There was a strong sense that young people feel they have been handed a heavy tool that no adult yet fully understands how to use, and
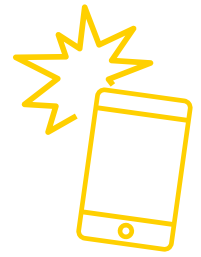
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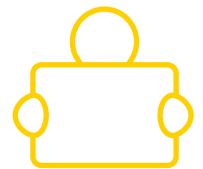
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that they themselves are still learning how to use safely. The tool is a double-edged sword: it depends on what 'side' you as a user end up on.[34] Social media brings copious benefits and opportunities, but also significant risks to mental health.

Young people see social media as a place they can both 'turn off and relax', and where they can find information. The online world can be a tool that gives young people greater access to factors that are known to benefit mental health offline, such as a sense of community, information, and support in difficult times.[35] 'For many young people', said one participant, 'it helps them to find someone or something to relate to instead of feeling constantly alone.'[36] Forming meaningful relationships, whether online or offline, benefits mental health. 79% of young people used social media platforms to try and help themselves when they were feeling upset – whether that is reaching out to offline or online friends, or looking for further information.[37] In fact, when questioned about what they thought about the coming Online Safety Bill, some young people were concerned about the Bill going ahead because it might potentially shut off areas of the online world that they found helpful.

These benefits particularly appeal to young people who do not feel part of their offline community, or who are unable to feel part of it because they cannot access it. A workshop participant, who was shielding through the pandemic, explained that the ability to make friends online kept them feeling connected and positive: for them, social media was a mental health 'necessity'.[38] Similarly, a gay or non-binary young person living in an isolated area might be able to find like-minded friends, from whom they might seek support. With 60% of young people taking part in supportive conversations about mental health at least once a month, there are obvious benefits to the ease of access to community that social media offers. Of course, not all online communities function in this positive way. Young people expressed concern and frustration at what they called the 'glamourisation' of mental health conditions, particularly in the eating disorder recovery communities that exist on image-based social media platforms.[39] Eating disorders are complex illnesses that manifest in a number of ways, and those who experience them can be susceptible to the 'competitive' element of these illnesses on image-based social media sites.[40]

What is clear from this variance of experience in online communities, is that the notion of 'harm' is nuanced, and varies from one young person to another. For some young people, 'videos of people who are struggling with the same things' help them feel understood and part of a community; but for others – for example, a young person with a severe eating disorder – seeing content of others who experience the same condition has the opposite effect, and may cause a deterioration in their symptoms.[41] The nuanced nature of harm is also evident in another benefit social media platforms offer: access to information.

The ability to find any content anywhere might benefit some young people by giving them access to helpful and supportive information or communities, but it puts those with pre-existing mental health conditions at significant risk. Being exposed to 'posts that would trigger me into wanting to self-harm or kill myself' or 'see ideas on how to kms (kill myself)', whether by accident or by actively seeking it out as a result of their condition (which 52% of young people in our survey said they had done), challenges the notion that providing more information for all young people will help all young people.[42] The posts these participants are referring to may not even constitute as material that promotes suicide, self-harm or eating disorders.

"...if it [social media] didn't exist in any sort of way, life would be better"

"For many young people... it helps them to find someone or something to relate to instead of feeling constantly alone"

79%
of young people used social media platforms to try and help themselves when they were feeling upset

60%
of young people took part in supportive conversations about mental health online at least once a month

The individualised nature of harm means that seemingly innocuous material may inadvertently be interpreted and consumed in way that results in mental harm. This is not a niche issue: 65% of young people received unhelpful content about mental health based on previous activity in the previous week or month.[43] Content generated 'based on previous activity' is content which is chosen and recommended to a user by an algorithm, sometimes referred to as an 'algorithmic recommendation'.

Later in this report, we will further scrutinise how the design of this kind of algorithm poses a mental health risk, but the key to understanding the link between social media and mental health is an acknowledgement of harm as nuanced. No two young people experience the same content in the same way, which means that any meaningful intervention to prevent harm should function outside the categorisation of content, and focus more on how and who such content is served to. What is clear is that accessing the substantial mental health benefits of the online world comes with a significant level of risk as a result of the way the online world is structured. The protection of benefits and mitigation of harm should be part of the Government's strategy to achieve its objective of safeguarding young people online.

Who is responsible?

Young people are not unwitting consumers who lack control over their online behaviour because they do not know or understand that the function of these algorithms is to maximise the volume of time they spend online. Far from it – they are more than aware of social media companies' business models, and have expressed that despite this knowledge, their mental health is still affected. When asked what rule they would write for the Online Safety Bill, one respondent answered: 'social media apps should prioritise the mental health of consumers rather than making it as addictive as possible to keep consumers online as long as possible.'[44]

In spite of this awareness, many young people feel personally responsible for their own online safety in a world primarily built by, and for, adults. When asked what they would tell a child or young person who was the same age as they were when they first joined social media, the majority of responses were cautionary. Many included instructions for avoiding negative behaviours, like 'don't self-harm or starve yourself just because you see others do it and you think it is a trend', and a few indicated they felt betrayed by the idea of joining social media: 'don't get in too deep even if you think you can handle it – you can't'.[45]

YoungMinds is calling for young people to be given back control over their online experiences. Part of that control will come from setting the parameters of what is and is not their responsibility online. The safety of their mental health – in a world that is built to maximise time and engagement, not wellbeing – is not their responsibility. While further education will boost young people's confidence to manage the online world, and encourage them to use it in a way that benefits their wellbeing, the scope in which this agency can be used must be broadened, and the virtual landscape they feel confident to explore should still be built with their wellbeing in mind. This generation has so far had to learn how to stay safe by experience, but it is also the responsibility of policy-makers to ensure the next generation can join social media platforms that are safe by design.

65%

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"Social media apps should prioritise the mental health of consumers rather than making it as addictive as possible to keep consumers online as long as possible."

Chapter 3: What do young people want to change?

Young people want to be able to use social media safely – and not just through their own behaviours, but through the creation or reform of platforms that are truly safe 'by design'.

Safety 'by design' can be defined in three ways:

- **Platform design:** the harm young people experience as a result of the design of online platforms

- **Education and empowerment:** the design and lack of good-quality and relevant education on looking after their wellbeing online

- **Participation:** the design of structural provisions that increase the participation of young people in making decisions about the regulation of the online world

In this chapter we will dive into each of these areas, explaining what reforms young people want, and proposing solutions which can be taken forward in the Online Safety Bill to make these reforms a reality.

Safety 'by design':

Platform design

Education and empowerment

Participation

3.1 Platform design

We asked young people what made them feel like their mental health was suffering when they went online, and their answer was clear: aspects of social media sites are 'MADE to make people sad.'[46] Discussions around the impact of illegal or harmful content on social media are valid, and young people were clear in asking that illegal content, or content that actively and unambiguously promotes harmful behaviours such as suicide, self-harm and eating disorders, is curtailed.[47] Yet young people were clear that removing harmful content alone would not succeed in removing the risk of harm it poses to their mental health, because accessing harmful content is a consequence of harm by design. The harmful elements in the design of social media platforms can be categorised in two ways: design causing harm using content that has a harmful impact on a young person, and design causing harm through the nature of the design itself.

Design and content: an unhealthy relationship?

Content served by algorithms is the product of automated decision-making systems – tools that are built into services. The decisions are made based on everything the algorithm has learned about that user from their previous online behaviours. The algorithm functions to build a relationship with a user in order to maximise the time and activity that user spends online. This strategy requires algorithms to make certain calculated assumptions about a person – about their background, likes and dislikes, identity – and then screen and filter content accordingly.

Unfortunately, the core purpose of the algorithm is to create spaces rich with the content that it judges to be the most appealing to a particular user, which means that it can become saturated and spiral rapidly between extremes within topics. For example, a young person who indicates an interest in healthy eating will be shown an array of recipes and food journals, which can slip into 'food of the day' posts that stray into the eating disorder recovery community, before the algorithm then begins to show extreme diet content and tips.[48]

For a young person to be shown content that harms their mental health is now the norm: only 9.2% of young people had 'never' seen something online that made them feel uncomfortable, upset or distressed.[49] Exposure to this content is rarely a result of a young person actively seeking it out. Instead, the distressing content typically finds its way to them. 61% of the time this happens through the 'explore' or 'discovery' feeds on social media sites, and 68% of the time through public posts from strangers.[50] In both instances, algorithms are the gatekeepers to that content. Young people would be unable to see posts from strangers without an algorithm judging that it is appropriate for them to see it.

Tragically, given how critical young people say social media is to their lives, the majority of them now believe that they would be unable to avoid harmful content online, even if they wanted to.[51] This shows that experiencing distress when accessing online content is now accepted as a part of the online experience, something that must be borne in order to accessing the benefits social media offers. Importantly, this acceptance is developed through attrition: younger age groups were more likely to say they felt they could avoid harmful

Only 9.2% of young people had 'never' seen something online that made them feel uncomfortable, upset or distressed

content, but as the age of the participants increased, so did the sense of hopelessness that this would be possible.[52] Accepting harm because it is built into the everyday functioning of the online world is something young people have learned through experience – which is perhaps why 89% of them agree to some extent that social media helps drive harmful behaviours.[53]

The nature of this harm is far-reaching, and varies from person to person. For example, when it comes to algorithmic functioning, 45% of young people from Black and racialised backgrounds said they felt unable to avoid harmful content in online public places. The majority of Black and racialised young people who answered our survey (92%) said this content would reach them in the form of public posts from strangers in comparison to 68% of young people from white backgrounds.[54] This indicates that Black and racialised young people experience additional online risks to their mental health compared to their white peers. Thorough scrutiny of the culture that underpins these sites is urgently needed.

Our research shows that it is not merely the individual pieces of content that constitute the greatest threat to young people's mental health; it is the architecture of the platforms themselves. For example, the potential harm of algorithms extends beyond their capacity to expose young people to types of content. They are, in and of themselves, harmful. The layout and function of social media sites has led to 42% of young people reporting early signs of addiction.[55] In the discussions we held with young people, they asked directly for companies to 'prioritise the mental health of consumers rather than making it as addictive as possible' and to 'remove [the] addictive features.'[56] Addiction itself seemed to be what young people feared most from these sites, with good reason – 80% reported that they wanted to leave a social media platform for wellbeing reasons but felt like they were unable to.[57] The reasons for this are not merely because the algorithms are showing them 'things that (they) like', but because the layout and feature design aspects of these sites, as identified by 5Rights, made it more difficult to stop.[58] This includes the pull-down feature on newsfeeds and the 'like' button, which psychologically sustains the promise of validation at any moment.[59]

Those with protected characteristics are also disproportionately affected by another design feature of social media sites that exist in isolation of content: image-editing apps.

Image-editing tools

'Filters are MADE to make people feel sad', one young person stated in a YoungMinds workshop.[60] This was during a discussion of the varied ways they had been impacted by image-editing tools, which are built into social media sites and give users the power to change or hide parts of themselves they would rather other people did not see. The consensus in the group was clear: image-editing might make a young person like a version of themselves, but the unattainability of that version has far-reaching mental health consequences and has the ability to significantly damage their body image over time. By giving users a tool to pick out seemingly undesirable features of their appearance, young people told us image-editing tools 'make you hate your body.'[61]

89% of young people agree to some extent that social media helps drive harmful behaviours

42% of young people reported early signs of addiction

80% reported that they wanted to leave a social media platform for wellbeing reasons but felt like they were unable to

"Filters are MADE to make people feel sad"

These functions are prominent on image-centric social media sites, which are also the most popular platforms among young people. Their potential to cause harm therefore warrants greater attention than the Bill currently gives. With the current safety duties applying only to online content, YoungMinds is concerned these design risks will fall out of the scope of the Bill.

Young people's experience of these tools allege that they also discriminate against those with protected characteristics. It was particularly concerning to hear that young people from Black and racialised backgrounds reported being offered skin-lightening edits with some tools, and those that offered to 'gender' the user would make harmful stereotypical adjustments to the user's image. Asking to be made 'female' meant some young people were given 'feminine features (that) made your face thinner.'[62] Stereotyping in image-editing tools had a discriminatory effect that approached demonising certain identities altogether. Young people pointed out that some filters were classist in their appropriation and gave the example of the gross exaggeration of one class stereotype, the caricatured 'chav' filter. Allowing young people to fixate on elements of themselves, and teach them to 'hate' them by allowing them to remove or 'fix' them, is not a function that serves the interest of any young person's wellbeing, let alone a young person who is grappling with discrimination against their identity or appearance in the offline world as well.

We also heard that labels and tags denoting that some images have been edited or filtered, a new feature of Instagram, do not lessen the mental health impact of seeing perfect images. Young people recognise that 'most photos are edited', but because 'it is almost impossible to break the thought process when you actually see it because it's become to [sic] instinctual,' these labels are too little, too late.[63] This learned belief in content that makes one's own body image worse also impacted the efficacy of body positive campaigns. Messaging which challenged what young people have been taught to believe was less effective; in this example, the message that 'all bodies are beautiful' did not convince young people.[64] These findings prove our assertion that social media companies need to do much more to address the significant mental health risks posed by image-editing, than simply labelling images after they have been filtered. Addressing this is particularly pressing because body image is stable from childhood into adulthood, and is also a predictor of general mental wellbeing.[65] This means that if a child develops a negative perception of their body as a child, this perception and the corresponding insecurities will remain with them into adulthood.[66] A systemic change to the way companies promote the use and accessibility of image editing apps needs serious assessment. In fact, it is one of the main things young people want from the Online Safety Bill.[67]

> "[Image-editing tools] make you hate your body."

How can we address this in the Bill?

Recommendation 1

Restructure the Bill around a duty of care towards the health and wellbeing of online service users, obliging online platforms to pay due regard to the mental health and wellbeing of all – and every – child and young person who uses their services.

The draft Online Safety Bill does not currently have sufficient provision to address harmful design. Instead, the Bill is structured around three safety duties: towards content that is illegal, content that is harmful to children, and content that is harmful to adults. Because the Bill is not structured to address design in isolation of content – there is no overarching framework that would provide for risks that fall outside the definition of content risks – it is set up to fail in its objective of making the online world safe for children.

YoungMinds want to see the inclusion of an overarching duty of care provision in the Online Safety Bill. This would save the regulator from needing to define what legal content is harmful on a generalised basis, and instead give them the power to ask social media companies to design harm out of young people's newsfeeds on an individualised basis. The duty of care would also require platform design to be included in all risk assessments carried out by a service provider, and become a core objective of a provider. It will also provide a safety net for the design risks that will not be captured by the existing safety duties.

Recommendation 2

The Bill must facilitate broader accountability and scrutiny by OfCom and other independent bodies, by a) obliging service providers to publish their child risk assessments, and give independent researchers access to relevant data, as required, to better facilitate broad scrutiny of compliance and b) obliging service providers to declare any changes being made to the function of their platforms, irrespective of whether these changes are required to be identified in their child risk assessment.

Proper scrutiny cannot happen without independent assessment. In addition to OfCom's oversight, independent researchers should have access to data relevant to their investigations so that any risks to young people are addressed as quickly as possible. Furthermore, obliging online service providers to be transparent about their activities will allow safety measures to be adjusted to be more efficient, thereby future-proofing the Bill. The Bill must also include an obligation for social media companies and online service providers to declare any changes they make to the function of their platforms. This will allow policy-makers and other key stakeholders to react appropriately to safeguard young people against any new risks, if necessary. It will also provide a safety-net for site features that are not currently included in companies' existing risk assessment obligations.

3.2 Education and Empowerment

Young people feel responsible for keeping themselves safe online, but feel disempowered to do so because they feel that the function of online platforms is rigged against them. It is something they feel they must gamble on, because there are so many opportunities for online and social media platforms to have real benefits to their mental health and wellbeing. The first step to giving young people back control over their online experiences is to reiterate that it is not solely young users' responsibility to chart out a safe route through the vast online world. Instead, it is primarily the responsibility of social media

companies to build safety into their services – they must not host users if they cannot accommodate their basic needs. Alongside this, young people must be given tools to feel empowered to keep their mental health safe online. YoungMinds recognises that this power lies in information, which is why we are calling for relevant, useful education to be provided to young people from an early age.

Missing curriculum

The state of children and young people's online safety education is, according to young people, dire. There is enormous variation in the quality of online safety lessons in school, with just under half of those we surveyed agreeing that they understand what the term 'online safety' means, and the majority of young people clustered around the 50% mark on the spectrum of how confident they felt after these lessons.[68]

The curriculum needs to address what is actually harming young people. At the moment the content seems to focus on telling young people what they should do to prevent other users perpetrating harm against them, for example by online grooming. Young people told us it 'needs to be more than just grooming', and should include 'compulsory nuanced and informed education about online safety. No 'don't give out your info' bullshit.'[69] Having illustrated just how pressing the issue of body image is for young people in the previous section of this report, we were concerned to read from one young person that they 'did about one lesson in the whole year that talked about image altering apps and filters'.[70] The current curriculum is described as 'completely useless fearmongering', as well as patronising, and many young people point out that it's problematic that their teachers have not shared the same first-hand experience of accessing online spaces.[71] In one workshop, a young person explained that many adults they interact with have not experienced growing up online, so they appear to jump to the extremes when thinking about children and young people navigating a space they themselves can find challenging.[72] The holes in this classroom curriculum must be recognised and mitigated, so that the education offered adequately serves young people's needs..

Missing voices

Education is not confined to the classroom, and greater support must be provided to young people when learning about the online world in other offline spaces. Conversation and interaction provide young people with valuable perspectives and knowledge on a variety of topics, but some young people feel these avenues of information and support are unavailable when it comes to online safety.

Many young people are left feeling isolated in their online experiences, with 37% of young people saying they don't talk to their offline friends about their online lives.[73] There is enormous variation in how young people of different maturity levels use social media. This is not defined by age, but by exposure, experience and knowledge of a platform, suggesting many are isolated in their experiences.

> "[We] did about one lesson in the whole year that talked about image altering apps and filters."

When they do talk about it, young people are more likely to talk about the positive experiences they have online than they are about the negative, making it difficult for peers and adults in a young person's life to be confident of what they are experiencing and how they are coping.[74] Just as one would support a young person through the friendships, fallouts and stresses that emerge in adolescence, there must be support systems put in place to equip young people with the confidence and vocabulary to speak about their online lives.

Both adults and young people struggle to find a common language around online safety – which is key to improving understanding and trust.[75] Young people feel unable to speak to adults about issues they are having online, telling us 'it's so much effort' having to explain everything to them.[76] Insight from YoungMinds' Parents Helpline shows that parents and carers feel ill-equipped to start conversations about online safety with the young people in their care, which either prevents them from doing so or results in any conversation taking place being an unconstructive one.[77] An inability to talk to a trusted adult about something that is concerning a young person is a barrier to improving mental health, while appropriate knowledge of media literacy will allow for productive conversations between young people and trusted adults around them.

Pitfalls of age-verification

Finally, young people's desire to access social media platforms and content from an early age is clear. 67% of young people admitted to joining social media before the required age of 13, and 25% joined at the age of 11, the age they are likely to be progressing from primary to secondary school.[78] Young people are sceptical that the introduction of age-verification will succeed in keeping younger age groups from joining: 'people will just fake their age and go searching elsewhere for content they would want to see.'[79] Castigating children for entering adult spaces before they are 'allowed to' will not prevent them from doing so and will not solve the issues they encounter once they get there. Providing information earlier on how to stay safe, hopefully reaching them before they join these platforms, is a more sustainable and realistic solution that would also improve the relationship between young people and adults.

"People will just fake their age and go searching elsewhere for content they would want to see."

How can we address this in the Bill?

Recommendation 3

Reinstate and strengthen the clause that obliges the Government to provide relevant and effective media literacy education for children and young people. It should also ensure the design and implementation of effective education initiatives for children and young people to strengthen and future-proof their level of media literacy with regard to their use, behaviours and control over their online experiences.

The education initiatives currently in place are not meeting the needs of young people; an overhaul of the curriculum for all children and young people, at all ages, is needed. This includes what the curriculum is made up of, who informs

it, who delivers it and how. 71% of young people want to help adults design lessons about online safety.[80] They want to turn lessons that feel like a 'check box' exercise into ones that are beneficial for them. Their contribution to designing new media literacy initiatives would provide the creativity, nuance and relevance that is missing.

Given that media literacy was among the changes most requested by young people when asked what they wanted to see in the Online Safety Bill, we were concerned to see the education clause removed from the draft earlier this year.[81] The justification, that education is already being provided under the Communications Act 2003, does not consider the quality of the education that young people are receiving. We are twenty years on from the enactment of that legislation, and the education provisions it includes are falling short of providing future-proofed, adaptable and relevant education to all young people. This is clear from the frequency with which young people report feeling frustrated by the quality of their digital education.

71%

of young people want to help adults design lessons about online safety

3.3 Participation

90% of young people think they could understand social media better than adults, yet nearly 80% of young people had never heard of the Online Safety Bill before.[82] If they haven't heard of the Bill, they certainly haven't been appropriately consulted on the new legislation that will soon govern how they use social media platforms – arguably one of the most important elements of their everyday lives. It is clear that adults have much to gain from listening to young people: from the political blind spots discussed at the start of this report; our research which sheds light on previously less-well understood aspects of young people's online experiences; and the fact that young people are often on the front line of emerging platforms and tools.

90%

of young people think they could understand social media better than adults

80%

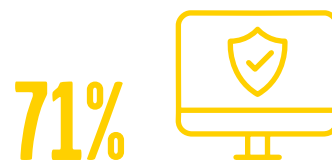of young people had never heard of the Online Safety Bill before

How can we address this in the Bill?

Recommendation 4

The Bill must oblige the Government to undertake meaningful consultation of children and young people in the design, implementation and monitoring of the provisions set out in the Online Safety Bill and any subsequent secondary legislation to follow, by (but not limited to) the creation and involvement of a Youth Online Safety Advisory Committee

To safeguard young people's mental health online, policy-makers need to understand the risks to their wellbeing. Young people themselves must also believe that their interests are being given sufficient weight, and that they have had a say in the rules they will be asked to follow. Increasing youth participation in decision-making processes is a step that is universally recognised as being paramount to increasing a child's wellbeing, and the Government must make it a priority as policy-making in this area resumes.[83]

There are ample opportunities to increase young people's participation in the regulation of the online world, and an obvious starting point is the creation of a Youth Online Safety Advisory Committee. YoungMinds would like to see this group's creation provided for via a specific provision in the Bill. This group should be made up of a representative group of young people. Given that 90% of young people from a Black, African, Caribbean or Black British background – who, as we have seen, experience additional risks to their mental health online – had not heard of the Online Safety Bill, a space where their voices can be heard is particularly necessary.[84] This group should provide OfCom with regular advice, and OfCom should introduce co-production policies that embed referral to the Youth Online Safety Advisory Committee in their work.

Young people are the only people who know what it means to be young and online. Ensuring their voices are heard consistently in the application of the Bill will future-proof it and ensure the provisions it makes are necessary and fit for purpose.

Chapter 4: The role of social media companies

This final chapter will highlight what remains to be stated: the role of social media companies in protecting the mental health of all of their users.

Over the spring and summer of 2022, both Snapchat and Instagram introduced new parental controls that allow family members to monitor who and what their young people are engaging with.[85] Instagram has also established a 'Take A Break' feature, which young users can use to set time limits on how long they spend on the app.[86] These are steps in the right direction, but we are concerned that they will not bring about the substantive change in the way service platforms function that is needed to adequately safeguard young people's mental health. We are not alone in our scepticism. Participants in our workshop made their concerns clear, telling us 'social media companies' priority is not your safety: its [sic] engagement. That's why they breed controversy, especially on Twitter.'[87]

> "Social media companies' priority is not your safety: its [sic] engagement."

Our primary concern is that the in-app tools offset companies' responsibility for the user's mental health onto the user, or their families and trusted adults around them. These tools only work if the user takes on the task of manually opting in or out of content and settings. They do not alter the fundamental architecture of these platforms, which we have established as sources of potential harm in this report.

Secondly, there are a vast number of young people who will not be able to access the benefits of these tools for a number of reasons. The success of the parental tools, for example, rests on the assumption that all young people have positive and open relationships with their parents or carers. Anecdotal evidence from YoungMinds' Parents Helpline, indicates that in reality, social media is a topic parents and carers often feel unable to speak about with their children.[88]

For parental tools to work, parents must also have a number of resources at their disposal, including time and a smartphone. Young people whose parents do not have access to these resources will miss out on the potential benefits of these tools, and reliance on access to these resources will worsen inequality in experience and safety. In the UK in 2020, 16% of the adult population in the lowest economic bracket did not own a smartphone, in comparison to only 8% of those in higher economic brackets.[89] Furthermore, both Instagram's and Snapchat's tools require the parents or carers themselves to open an account, which puts those who choose not to enter these digital spaces in a difficult position. We know that 82% of Snapchat's daily users are between the ages of 18 to 24: this indicates how few older adults are choosing to engage with this app, and allows us to draw an assumption about how many parents therefore will be unable to set up parental tools on their child's account.[90]

Finally, even if they are successfully deployed by service users, the tools themselves are unlikely to fulfil their aim in the long term. In our workshops, young people expressed frustration and fatigue when asked if being alerted that they were scrolling for too long would encourage them to reduce their time online. One stated plainly that even without the tool they were 'aware of it when (they're) scrolling' and that it 'doesn't stop them.'[91]

We also must remember that these tools are subject to change at the whim of companies and cannot solely be relied on for keeping young people safe and supported. Instagram, for example, previously had a function for users to set time limits on their daily app use. The original minimum option of 5 minutes was quietly increased to 30 minutes after two years.[92] Although the nature of the Internet means the way people use it is open to rapid change, in reality we have a small number of platforms controlled by a small number of individuals. As proven by the recent change in ownership at Twitter, these shifts can sometimes happen overnight. This is another argument for a strong duty of care framework to ensure that while the whims and biases of companies may shift over time, they will regardless remain obliged to prevent their users from experiencing undue harm on their platforms.

Our primary concern is that the in-app tools offset companies' responsibility for the user's mental health onto the user, or their families and trusted adults around them

Recommendations

In addition to continuing to take proactive steps, as outlined above, the Online Safety Bill must provide a legal framework to hold social media companies to the standard required by businesses with so much influence over the wellbeing of the UK's population. Our first and second key recommendations, if taken up in the Bill, will create this legal framework:

Recommendation 1

Restructure the Bill around a duty of care towards the health and wellbeing of online service users, obliging online platforms to pay due regard to the mental health and wellbeing of all – and every – child and young person who uses their services.

Implementation of an overarching duty of care – a recommendation made to mitigate harms caused by the design of online service provider platforms – will set a minimum standard to direct social media companies in designing safer sites. This is because the health and wellbeing of their users will be the objective of any changes they make, as per the Bill's requirements.

Recommendation 2

The Bill must facilitate broader accountability and scrutiny by OfCom and other independent bodies, by a) obliging service providers to publish their child risk assessments, and give independent researchers access to relevant data, as required, to better facilitate broad scrutiny of compliance and b) obliging service providers to declare any changes being made to the function of their platforms, irrespective of whether these changes are required to be identified in their child risk assessment.

In addition to OfCom's oversight, independent researchers should have access to data relevant to their investigations so that any risks to young people are addressed as quickly as possible. Furthermore, obliging online service providers to be transparent about their activities will allow safety measures to be adjusted to be more efficient, as well as future-proofing the Bill.

Conclusion

Social media platforms have the potential to positively impact young people's mental health, by granting them access to some of the things we know benefit mental wellbeing: community, information and freedom. If young people were given control over their online experiences, these sites could be spaces which provide support to young people struggling with their mental health, and which contribute to young people fulfilling their potential.

To achieve this, reforms are needed to the way social media platforms are structured, used and talked about. A shift in focus from content to design will herald a more efficient and systemically caring era in the online world. Taken together with increased information and education, and increased participation in designing and implementing these measures, the reforms we propose in this report would pave the way to a more sustainable relationship between young people and social media.

We are calling for just four reforms to the Bill, as explained throughout this report:

The reforms we propose in this report would pave the way to a more sustainable relationship between young people and social media.

Recommendation 1

Restructure the Bill around a duty of care towards the health and wellbeing of online service users, obliging online platforms to pay due regard to the mental health and wellbeing of all – and every – child and young person who uses their services.

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Recommendation 3

Reinstate and strengthen the clause that obliges the Government to provide relevant and effective media literacy education for children and young people. It should also ensure the design and implementation of effective education initiatives for children and young people to strengthen and future-proof their level of media literacy with regard to their use, behaviours and control over their online experiences.

Recommendation 4

The Bill must oblige the Government to undertake meaningful consultation of children and young people in the design, implementation and monitoring of the provisions set out in the Online Safety Bill and any subsequent secondary legislation to follow, by (but not limited to) the creation and involvement of a Youth Online Safety Advisory Committee

We believe these are feasible, targeted recommendations that will deliver on the changes young people have highlighted to us through our research. Now is the time for the Government to listen to these recommendations and young people are clamouring for them to take action, 35% of young people think the Government should take responsibility for mental health, compared to just 7% identifying social media companies as responsible.[93] YoungMinds recognises that companies hold the technological expertise to adapt the digital environment to benefit young people – but they must be guided by those who stand the most to gain or lose from such changes. The voice of young people must be given sufficient weight as Parliament continues to consider this legislation.

As work on the Bill restarts after a period of politics-induced dormancy, we hope this report will join the chorus of voices willing decision-makers to put children and young people first when it comes to regulating the online world.

35%

of young people think the Government should take responsibility for mental health, compared to just 7% identifying social media companies as responsible

Endnotes

1   YoungMinds survey of 14,000 young people (2021), awaiting publication. For more information, please contact Ellie.White@youngminds.org.uk

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