

Public Bill Committee call for evidence on the Online Safety Bill

Response from the British Psychological Society

This paper sets out the British Psychological Society's (BPS) submission to the House of Commons Public Bill Committee's call for written evidence on the Online Safety Bill. The BPS is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK, and is responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and application of the discipline.

As a society we support and enhance the development and application of psychology for the greater public good, setting high standards for research, education, training and knowledge, and disseminating our knowledge to increase public awareness.

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1. The BPS welcomes the introduction of a Bill to regulate digital spaces and protect people from online harm. However, we believe that the following changes are needed to extend the scope and sweep of the Bill in order for it to effectively make the UK the safest place in the world to be online:
 - **Extend** the duty to take measures to address the risk of exposure to content that is **legal but harmful** in relation to adults to **all platforms**, not just the largest Category 1 platforms;
 - The BPS calls on the Government to add an additional **explicit duty on Ofcom** to address **cross-platform risks**, and to place a **clear requirement on platforms** to co-operate on cross-platform risks. This is necessary in order to address harms such as child grooming moving across platforms to encrypted messaging and livestreaming sites.
2. It is vital that all content on platforms that is harmful, regardless of whether it is legal, must fall under the scope of this new legislative framework and that the above additional amendments are made to strengthen the effectiveness of the Bill in upholding the safety of platform users.
3. Exposure to certain content online can have adverse psychological implications for both children and adults. For instance, users can be **encouraged to engage in behaviours that are dangerous** to themselves and others in the “real world”. The internet can distort, normalise, glorify and by extension encourage behaviours that compromise the safety of its users and those around them. Psychology research from the [University of Durham](#) has demonstrated a link between exposure to content depicting risky behaviour- such as drug use, excessive alcohol use, disordered eating, self-harm, violence to others, and dangerous pranks- and users’ own offline risky behaviour¹.
4. Additionally, evidence [from KCL and the NHS](#) has suggested that problematic use of social media impacts suicide risk². Although this scientific investigation is in its infancy, it is clear that **the Bill must be strengthened in order to safeguard adults, as well as children, from legal but harmful content and protect public health**.
5. In addition to being harmful from a behavioural psychological perspective, platforms can facilitate **psychological harm directly through the digital experiences people have on them**. Research from [the Journal of Cyber-Psychology](#) has confirmed that platforms can lead to compulsive internet use and excessive chatting for certain groups (such as those who are not socially anxious) over time³. In addition, a longitudinal analysis from [ScienceDirect](#) has shown that increased

¹ Branley & Covey “*Is exposure to online content depicting risky behaviour related to viewers’ own risky behaviour offline?*” *Computers in Human Behavior* 2017

² Sedgwick et al “*Social media, internet use and suicide attempts in adolescents*” *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 2019

³ Van Zalk “*Social anxiety moderates the links between excessive chatting and compulsive Internet use*” *Journal of Cyber-Psychology* 2016

problematic social media use predicted increased loneliness, and increased loneliness predicted decreased satisfaction with life⁴.

6. Moreover, a report from the [Department of Psychology in the University of Central Florida](#) has shown that explicit content exposure, cyberbullying and sexual solicitations evoke symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁵. This is especially a concern given that the [NSPCC's analysis](#) of police reports from England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Channel Islands has shown that cases of children being sexually abused online has grown by three-quarters in four years⁶.
7. It is essential that all possible steps are taken to make the Bill as robust as possible in order to safeguard children from traumatic experiences and protect their immediate and long-term mental health.

⁴ Marttila et al "Does excessive social media use decrease subjective well-being? A longitudinal analysis of the relationship between problematic use, loneliness and life satisfaction" ScienceDirect 2021

⁵ McHugh et al "When social media traumatizes teens: The roles of online risk exposure, coping, and post-traumatic stress" Internet Research 2018

⁶ "Online child abuse crimes have surged by three-quarters and more must be done to protect children online" NSPCC 2021