

# Unfair Impacts:

How LGBTQIA+ Youth are  
Disproportionately Harmed by Online  
Platform Design Decisions

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JUNE 2023



# **Unfair Impacts: How LGBTQIA+ Youth are Disproportionately Harmed by Online Platform Design Decisions**

# Executive Summary

Young people do not experience the digital world equally, and the way online services and products are delivered and designed can exacerbate inequalities. This briefing documents how young LGBTQIA+ people disproportionately experience online harms and explains how proposals in the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) may help to alleviate them. In March 2023, working with YouGov, we polled 912 teenagers aged 13-17 from around the US and found inequalities in design harms experienced by teenagers. It finds:

- **Platforms design their products to maximize the amount of time and engagement users spend on them.** This includes deliberately building in features that are designed to extend use. These extended use designs appear to affect young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ more so. Polling undertaken for this report finds that:
  - 55% of LGBTQIA+ young people reported scrolling for too long every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 49% of those who did not identify as LGBTQIA+.
  - 72% of LGBTQIA+ young people reported losing track of time when they are on social media, every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 65% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQIA+.

The consequences of these sticky designs were real in young people's lives. Young LGBTQIA+ identifying young people were more likely to report losing sleep or not doing as much homework as they wanted because they felt 'stuck' on social media.

- **Recommender systems and algorithms can create risks for young LGBTQIA+ young people.** For example, this research shows that young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ were more likely to be recommended harmful content:
  - 18% of young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ were recommended content about drugs or drug sales *every time they went on social media* or several times a day, compared to 12% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQIA+.
  - 24% of young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ were recommended dieting or pro-eating disorder content every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 18% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQIA+.

They were also more likely to recommend more 'strangers' as friends to LGBTQIA+ young people, which is known to be a safety risk. 43% of young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ claim that they are recommended a stranger to 'friend' or 'follow' every time they use social media or several times a day, compared to 35% of young people who do not identify as LGBTQIA+.

- **Targeted advertising disproportionately affects LGBTQIA+ young people.** People who identify as LGBTQIA+ have a long history of surveillance, and it appears that this has continued in the digital age for young people. Much of the data harvesting that happens in the digital world is to develop profiles to serve target ads. Young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ appear to be more affected by this targeting. We asked young people about the frequency with which they were

served stalker ads, or ads for things they just talked about. 30% of young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ reported almost always seeing ads for things they just talked about, compared to 20% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQIA+. Young LGBTQIA+ people were also slightly more likely to almost always see advertisements for products they think are probably unsafe.

It is time that lawmakers and regulators in the United States take action. Proposals in front of Congress such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) would help ensure that platforms are designed and operate in a manner that prioritizes children's best interests. Together, these bills would address the features and functions that exacerbate online harms for youth, including content recommendation systems, targeted advertising, and the mass data collections that make both possible. If enacted into law, these bills would help mitigate the disproportionate impacts on our most vulnerable youth.

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# Foreword from David Jay

Queer kids need the internet. As the founder of one of the world's largest and longest-running communities for asexual and demisexual people, I have seen how the connections that LGBTQAI+ kids form online can be literally life-saving. When queer kids are met with transphobia and homophobia in the offline world they have a long history of turning to the internet to find acceptance and support, and since its inception the internet has been a place where they have found it.

All of this means that when queer kids show up to the internet, they show up vulnerable. This vulnerability means that queer kids have more to gain from the internet, but they often also have more to lose. Business models that would rather see queer kids sleepless than supported, recommendation systems that would rather compound their shame than address it take advantage of this vulnerability. In order to understand the impact of the digital world on the mental health of young people, it is critical to examine the specific impact on LGBTQAI+ youth.

The research in this report highlights that impact. Queer kids need the internet, but not the internet that we have today and not the internet that an unregulated tech industry is building for tomorrow. Regulations like the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and COPPA 2.0 play a vital role in incentivizing the kind of innovation that queer kids need, an internet where self-acceptance and support are easier to find than compulsion and shame.

*David Jay*  
*Board Member*  
*Fairplay*

*Founder and Board Chair*  
*Asexual Visibility and Education Network*

# Foreword from Arielle Geismar

As a queer young person, one of the most important resources I have access to is our community via the internet. It has enabled me to learn about myself, educate others, create resources and moments, and share a deep sense of advocacy and joy. It has allowed me to strengthen my sense of self and has offered access to online platforms and audiences that stand up to hateful behavior offline. Our community and the safety our shared space holds, amidst an otherwise unsafe environment, immense value. It is an indescribable and daily necessity in mine and other queer people's lives.

This report, very critically, outlines the real impacts of harmful, profit-driven design choices made by Big Tech companies on a community that is already facing harm offline. My own identity online is disproportionately targeted and commodified based on intentional decisions by Big Tech companies to prey on vulnerabilities they believe would extend our engagement. Their choices correlate to declining mental health and well-being among a community already fighting day in and day out.

Simply put - when queer youth are under attack, we create digital spaces. They are our home, and they are our right. *They are lifesaving.* The last thing we need is to be unsafe there, too. Protections for queer youth embedded in the design of the digital world would enable us space to grow and thrive.

This report sounds a clear alarm – safeguards are needed, and accountability is crucial. I urge policymakers to heed our acute need for legislation that prioritizes and protects our well being above the profit of Big Tech. As leaders and creators on these platforms, so too should our voices be prioritized in their design and regulation.

***Arielle Geismar (she/her)***

*Rising senior at George Washington University, Digital Wellness Leader, Content Creator, Design It For Us Coalition Member.*

# Introduction

An estimated 7-9% of youth identify as LGBTQIA+,<sup>1</sup> totalling over 3.2 million children between the ages of eight and eighteen, over half of whom are youth of color.<sup>2</sup> Sixty percent of LGBTQIA+ youth reported that they felt discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>3</sup> Compared to other youth, LGBTQIA+ youth are more vulnerable to mental health issues and risk of suicide. Forty-one percent of LGBTQIA young people ages 13 to 24 seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with youth who are transgender, nonbinary, and/or people of color reporting even higher rates than that.<sup>4</sup> Seventy and 57% of LGBTQIA+ youth ages 13-17 also reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

For LGBTQIA+ youth, the internet can be a place of refuge, with research saying that having a supportive online community correlated with lower suicide risk.<sup>6</sup> In a 2021 survey, “an overwhelming majority of LGBTQIA+ youth said that social media has both positive (96%) and negative (88%) impacts on their mental health and well-being.”<sup>7</sup> On paper, the internet holds so much promise for LGBTQIA+ youth searching for community and exploring their identities: they could connect with friends in similar situations, get to know themselves better, or feel supported when living in an environment that doesn’t accept them for who they are. But, if the best “safe” digital spaces available for queer kids and teens only exist on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok that commodify every aspect of kids’ experiences online, the platforms inevitably push them to become – and reduce them to – profit makers at the expense of their well-being.

Tech companies make deliberate decisions about the design of their online platforms, usually driven by how they can maximize profit. And, kids are big business for these companies. Through the use of sophisticated psychological and design techniques, tech companies incentivize children and teens to spend ever-increasing amounts of time on social media which also perpetuates many of the harms noted above for LGBTQIA+ youth.<sup>8</sup> Some of the strategies that tech companies like TikTok, Meta (Facebook and

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQIA+ “is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, [asexual, intersex]... and more. These terms are used to describe a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity.”

<https://gaycenter.org/about/LGBTQ/> In this report, we also use LGBTIQ, which is the acronym used in the polling process, when directly describing the questions asked during or results of polling.

<sup>2</sup> Movement Advancement Project 2023 ‘LGBTQ Youth’

<https://www.lgbtmap.org/policy-and-issue-analysis/Lgbtq-youth>

<sup>3</sup> The Trevor Project 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> See generally, Center for Digital Democracy & Fairplay, *In the Matter of Petition for Rulemaking to Prohibit the Use of Children of Design Features that Maximize for Engagement*, (filed Nov. 17 2022).

<https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EngagementPetition.pdf>; see also Center for Digital Democracy & Fairplay, *Comments Re: Request for Public Comment on the Federal Trade Commission’s Request for Comments Regarding Topics to be Discussed at Dark Patterns Workshop*, (filed May 27, 2021),

<https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/darkpatterns.pdf>; Julie Jargon, *TikTok Brain Explained: Why Some Kids Seem Hooked on Social Video Feeds*, Wall Street Journal (April 2, 2022),

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/tiktok-brain-explained-why-some-kids-seem-hooked-on-social-video-feeds-11648866192>.



Instagram), and Snapchat use keep children tied to their devices and expose them to harmful content. Some of harmful design decisions include:

**Engagement tactics.** Also called addictive or extended use designs, these features encourage compulsive behavior by rewarding kids unpredictably for merely scrolling, tapping, and/or logging onto a website or service in order to maximize a young person’s time on the service. They may also include nudges or notifications to bring someone back to an app once they have stopped using it or social manipulation tactics, like “snapstreaks” or “likes” which leverage youth’s desire for social relationships to encourage greater time spent and/or activities performed on a website or service.<sup>9</sup>

**Algorithmic recommendations.** Algorithms drive much of what we see on social media platforms. For example, in 2018, YouTube outlined that around 70% of what people viewed on that platform was a result of their recommender algorithm. Algorithms drive recommendations of what content to see, watch, who to follow, or who to friend.<sup>10</sup> It is well documented that algorithmic recommendations frequently lead users into “rabbit holes” of content; a 2021 study showed that engagement with the unregulated transphobic content that is rampant on TikTok led users to *even more* content that was blatantly anti-LGBTQIA+, racist, violent, antisemitic, and white supremacist.<sup>11</sup>

**Surveillance advertising.** Surveillance advertising or targeted advertising includes products or content that is directly recommended to a user based on data the platform knows about you, including your name, age, and location but also how many seconds you spend watching a certain type of TikTok video, what’s in your online shopping cart, what stores a child passes by on their way home from school.<sup>12</sup> Targeted ads may include “stalker ads,” or ads for things they just talked about or ads related to content they have interacted with online, even if they are harmful.

This report discusses how each of these types of design decisions disproportionately impacts LGBTQIA+ youth and sheds light on the inequitable impacts Big Tech has on their well-being.

These design decisions continue to be just that: choices that tech companies are making. Current proposed legislation such as the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and the Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) has the potential to impose duties that would require tech companies to put the best interests of children at the forefront of their design and to limit the amount of data companies collect from youth in the first place. This report concludes with a discussion of how this legislation would specifically mitigate the harms to LGBTQIA+ youth.

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<sup>9</sup> *Petition for Rulemaking to Prohibit the Use on Children of Design Features that Maximize for Engagement* <https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EngagementPetition.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> “Ashley Rodriguez 2018 “YouTube’s recommendations drive 70% of what we watch” Quartz <https://qz.com/1178125/youtubes-recommendations-drive-70-of-what-we-watch/>

<sup>11</sup> Id.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Garin “Making sense of surveillance advertising (spoiler: there is none!” *Fairplay: Childhood Beyond Brands* [https://fairplayforkids.org/surveillanceads\\_ftc\\_comments/](https://fairplayforkids.org/surveillanceads_ftc_comments/)

# Methods

Working with YouGov, we polled 912 teenagers aged 13-17 in March 2023.

The poll included questions about the types of platforms young people use, the frequency at which they experienced various design harms (such as feeling stuck on social media, being recommended strangers as friends, etc.), as well as some of the consequences of this (such as lost sleep). We also asked about their experiences with targeted or behavioral advertising.

We asked young people to self identify their LGBTQIA+ status, asking respondents 'if you identify as LGBTQI+'. 80% of the sample responded 'no' (or 731 young people), 14% of the sample responded 'yes' LGBTQI+ (136 young people) and another 6% said they'd rather not say. The results analyzed below compare those who identify as LGBTQI+, compared to those who did not identify as LGBTQI+.

About the sample:

- **Geography:** Included young people from 37 states across the US
- **Gender:** 49% identified as male, 48% as female and 2% as non-binary (the other 1% is rounding)
- **Age:** 62% of respondents were aged between 13-15 years olds (3 year bracket) and 38% aged 16 or 17 years old (2 year bracket)
- **Race:** 54% of the sample identified as White, 24% as Hispanic, 14% as Black and 8% as Asian. This diversity was also reflected in those who identified as LGBTQI+ and those who did not (see table 1).

Identified as...	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian/Other
LGBTIQ+	57%	20%	11%	12%
Not LGBTQI+	55%	23%	15%	7%

Table 1: A breakdown of the Race of respondents who identified as LGBTQI+ (LGBTQIA+) and those who did not.

# Impacts of online platform design decisions on LGBTQIA+ youth

## Engagement tactics, or addictive and extended use designs

Young people can be especially vulnerable to extended use designs or ‘addictive’ design features that attempt to keep young people ‘hooked’ on a digital product. Also called engagement tactics, these include push notifications designed to pull young people back into an app,<sup>13</sup> endless scroll, content recommender algorithms that are “optimized for addiction”<sup>14</sup> (i.e., “trained” to maximize the amount of time young people spend watching videos),<sup>15</sup> removing video time markers,<sup>16</sup> or other features that might remind young people to log off and take a break.<sup>17</sup> Currently, 36 percent of American teenagers aged 13-17 say they spend too much time on social media, and 54 percent say it would be hard or very hard to give up social media.<sup>18</sup> And a report released this year by Amnesty International on young people ages 13-24 found “a staggering 74 percent of respondents report checking their social media accounts more than they would like to.”<sup>19</sup>

In rare cases, this extends to a medical addiction, called internet gaming disorder.<sup>20</sup> An estimated 8 percent of American children who use the internet and games show signs of clinical addiction.<sup>21</sup> More commonly, extended use design causes constant relationship harm. Intrafamily conflict around screen

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<sup>13</sup> De Montfort University 2022 *DMU research suggests 10-year-olds lose sleep to check social media* <https://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/research-news/2022/dmu-research-suggests-10-year-olds-lose-sleep-to-check-social-media.aspx#:~:text=Research%20support-,DMU%20research%20suggests%2010%2Dyear%2Dolds%20lose%20sleep%20to%20check.up%20to%20use%20social%20media>

<sup>14</sup> Allison Zakon 2022 ‘Optimized for addiction: Extending product liability concepts to defectively designed social media algorithms and overcoming the communications decency act’ *Wisconsin Law Review* (5) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3682048>

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Roose 2019 ‘The Making of a YouTube Radical’ *New York Times* <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/08/technology/youtube-radical.html>

<sup>16</sup> Louise Matsakis 2019 ‘On TikTok, There Is No Time’ *Wired* <https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-time/>

<sup>17</sup> For example, Instagram allows users to set daily time limits to prevent overuse. Consumers used to be able to self define their daily limit, including setting limits at 10 or 15 min. Earlier this year, Meta set a new ‘limit’ to these daily limits. Consumers can only now set a daily limit of 30 minutes or more (See Natash Lomas 2022 ‘Instagram quietly limits ‘daily time limit’ option’ *TechCrunch* <https://techcrunch.com/tag/frances-haugen/#:~:text=Instagram%20quietly%20limits%20%E2%80%98daily%20time%20limit%E2%80%99%20option%20Natasha.photo-sharing%20app%20Instagram%20appears%20to%20have%20quietly%20remove> )

<sup>18</sup> Pew Research Center 2022 *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022* <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International, “We are totally exposed”: Young people share concerns about social media’s impact on privacy and mental health in global survey (Feb. 7, 2023) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/02/children-young-people-social-media-survey-2/>

<sup>20</sup> As defined in DSM5 onwards (See American Psychiatric Association 2013 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th edn.* American Psychiatric Publishing Arlington). See also Cecilie Andreassen 2015 ‘Online social network site addiction: A comprehensive review’ *Current Addiction Reports* doi:10.1007/s40429-015-0056-9, who explores the potential for social networking sites to be addictive

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Gentile 2009 ‘Pathological video-game use among youth ages 8 to 18: a national study’ *Psychological Science* 2009 doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02340

time is rife,<sup>22</sup> and many teachers report conflict in the classroom over the use of digital devices.<sup>23</sup> These can also cause physical harm, because they can lead to a loss of sleep.<sup>24</sup> But these abusive designs are not felt equally by all young people. Extended-use design techniques can exacerbate social inequity for children and young people.

We asked teens ages 13-17 about how often they felt affected by extended use designs, and while the effects were significant for all young people, young LGBTIQ+ young people appear to fare worse.

For example, young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ were more likely to report scrolling for too long on social media. 55% of LGBTIQ+ young people reported scrolling for too long every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 49% of young people who did not identify as LGBTIQ+.

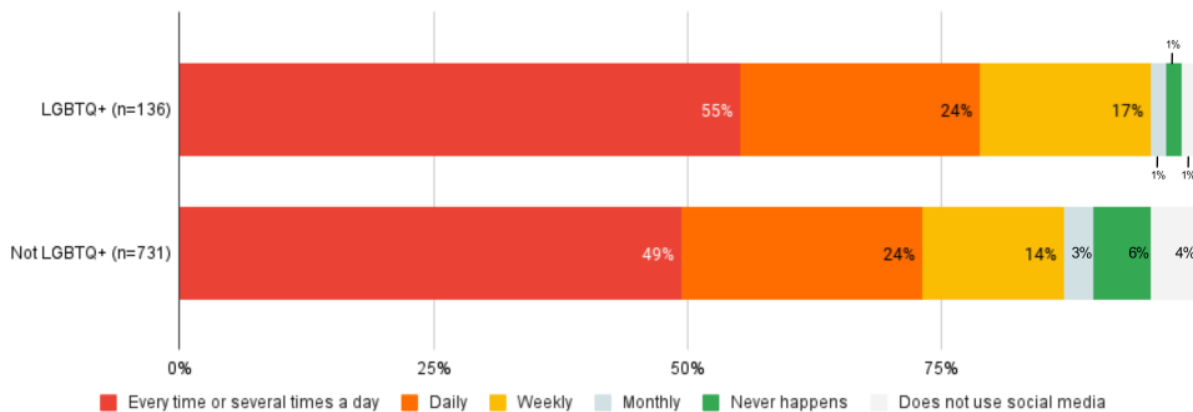


Figure 1: The percentage of teens who say they scroll for too long on social media, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

Likewise, young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ were more likely to report losing track of time on social media more often. 72% of LGBTIQ+ young people reported losing track of time when they are on social media, every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 65% of young people who did not identify as LGBTIQ+.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Domoff, Aubrey Borgen, Sunny Jung Kim, Jennifer Emond 2021 'Prevalence and predictors of children's persistent screen time requests: A national sample of parents' Human Behavior and Emerging Tech doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.322

<sup>23</sup> Abigail Hess 2019 'Research continually shows how distracting cell phones are—so some schools want to ban them' CNBC <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/18/research-shows-that-cell-phones-distract-students--so-france-banned-them-in-school--.html>

<sup>24</sup> De Montfort University 2022 DMU research suggests 10-year-olds lose sleep to check social media <https://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/research-news/2022/dmu-research-suggests-10-year-olds-lose-sleep-to-check-social-media.aspx#:~:text=Research%20support-DMU%20research%20suggests%2010%2Dyear%2Dolds%20lose%20sleep%20to%20check.up%20to%20use%20social%20media>

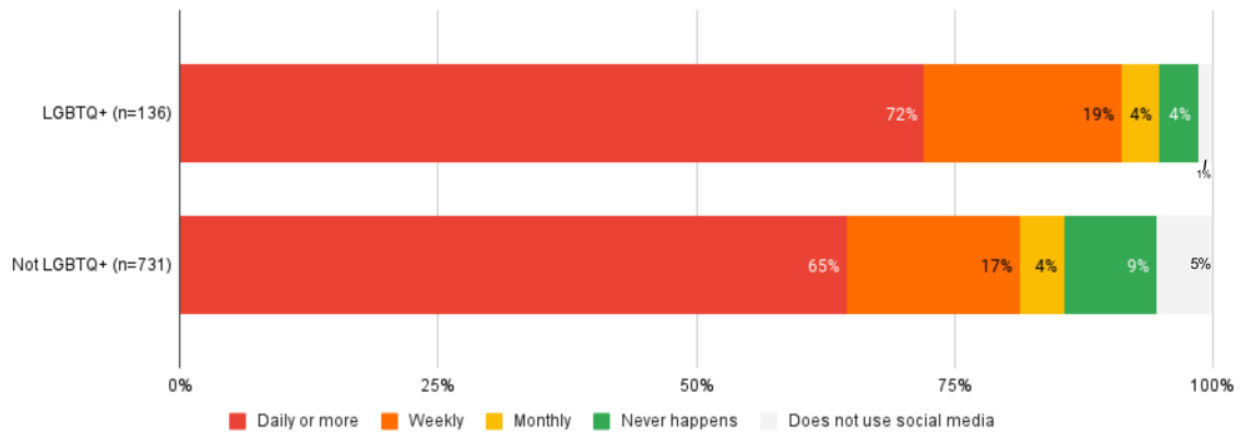


Figure 2: The percentage of teens who report losing track of time when they are on social media, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

These extended use designs can have consequences for young people’s lives. For example, LGBTIQ+ young people suggested they were more likely to report losing sleep or not doing as much homework as they wanted because they felt stuck on social media. 49% of young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ suggested they lost sleep every day (compared to 45% of non-LGBTIQ+ young people), and 47% said they did not do as much homework as they wanted (compared to 42% of non-LGBTIQ+ young people) because they felt stuck on social media.

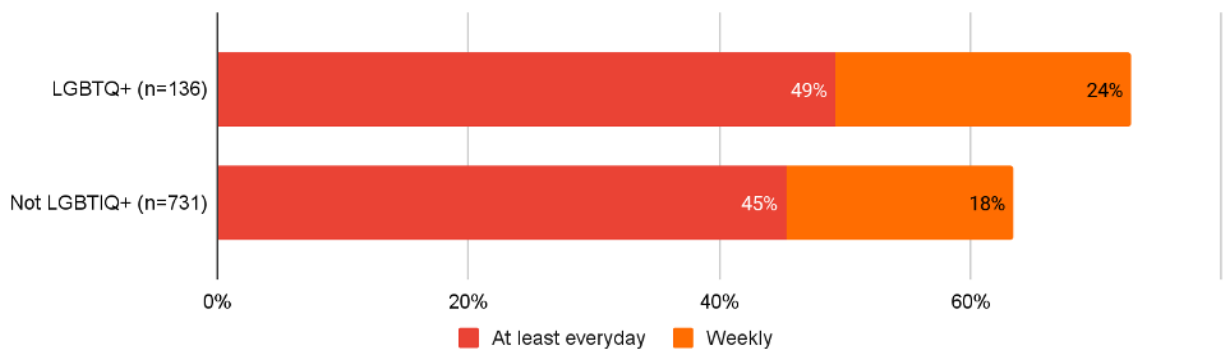


Figure 3: The percentage of teens who report losing sleep, because they felt stuck on social media, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

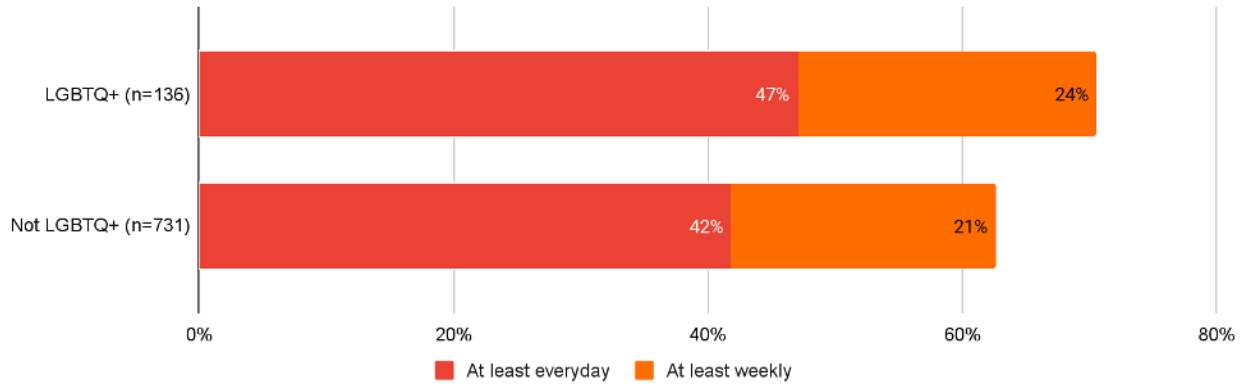


Figure 4: The percentage of teens who report not doing as much homework as they wanted, because they felt stuck on social media, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

# Algorithmic recommendations

All algorithms, including ‘content recommender’ algorithms, ‘ad delivery’ algorithms, and ‘friend recommender algorithms,’ have the ability to discriminate. Algorithms work by profiling young people in order to recommend content or advertisements that companies have calculated as being potentially interesting to users. No recommendation is ‘neutral,’ and every profile created inherently has race, gender, religion, and other sensitive characteristics baked into it. This means that algorithms can exacerbate social inequity where they unevenly choose to promote or restrict harmful content, ads, or contacts.

## Content recommender systems

When it comes to the algorithmic promotion of content to children and young people, this can physically hurt children and damage their health when it recommends harmful content. For example, search algorithms routinely make dangerous challenges available to children<sup>25</sup> and recommender algorithms promote pro-anorexia content and creators,<sup>26</sup> or extremist material,<sup>27</sup> to young people. These effects can be catastrophic. Recently, a UK coroner ruled that online content had played more than a minor role in causing the suicide of 14 year-old Molly Russell, after seeing extensive self-harm and suicide content in her recommended (algorithmically promoted) feed. The coroner concluded that Molly “died from an act of self-harm while suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content”.<sup>28</sup> What we promote in young people’s feeds matters.

But ‘content recommender systems’ can also create new discriminations and exacerbate inequalities, too. We polled 912 teenagers from across the US, and asked how often they were recommended content that shows promotes dieting or disordered eating and content about drugs or drug sales. We found the young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ were more likely to report being recommended this content more frequently. 18% of young people who identified as LGBTQIA+ were recommended content about drugs or drug sales every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 12% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQIA+.

Likewise, 24% of young people who identified as LGBTQ+ suggested they were recommended dieting or pro-eating disorder content every time they went on social media or several times a day, compared to 18% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQ+.

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<sup>25</sup> Fairplay 2022 *Dared by the Algorithm: Dangerous Challenges are Just a Click Away*  
<https://fairplayforkids.org/dared-by-algorithm/>

<sup>26</sup> For example, a photo-sharing platform’s algorithms routinely promote pro-anorexia content and creators to users (Fairplay 2022 *Designing for Disorder*)  
[https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/designing\\_for\\_disorder.pdf?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=ec346b0d-3a84-4f12-b071-a72549987438](https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/designing_for_disorder.pdf?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=ec346b0d-3a84-4f12-b071-a72549987438)

<sup>27</sup> Ralph Housego & Rys Farthing 2022 ‘Social Grooming: Algorithms mis/shaping political discourse for young voters’ *AQ Magazine*, 93(4), 3–9, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.642086521993890>

<sup>28</sup> BBC 2022 ‘Molly Russell inquest: Father makes social media plea’ *BBC*  
<https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/18/research-shows-that-cell-phones-distract-students--so-france-banned-them-in-school--.html>

This is reinforced by other research, that shows that girls and young women who identify as LGBTIQ+ are more likely to report seeing harmful suicide and self-harm content and harmful eating disorders content across most popular social media platforms.<sup>29</sup>

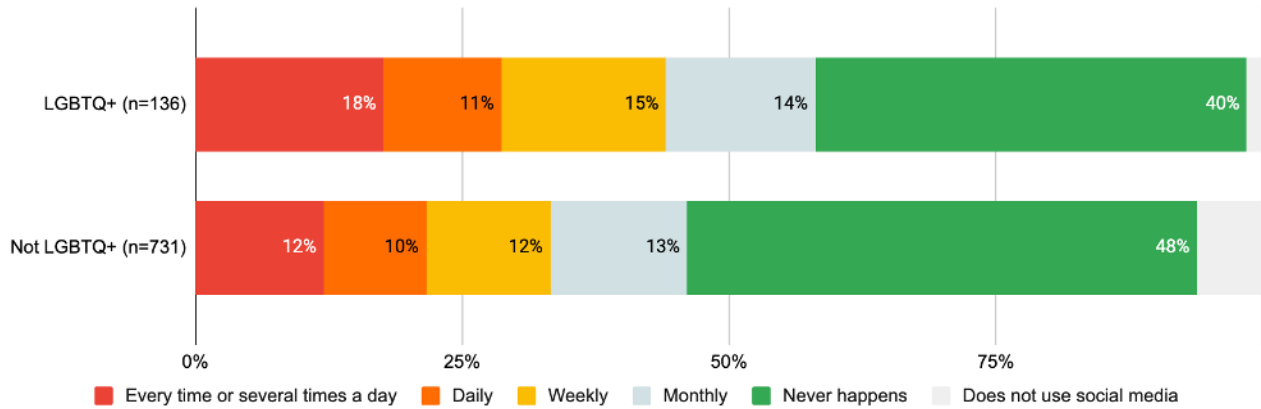


Figure 5: The percentage of teens who report seeing content about drug use or drug sale, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

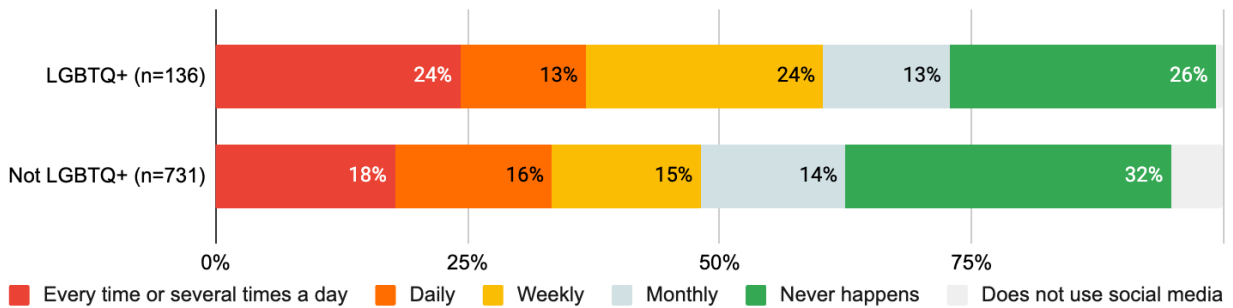


Figure 6: The percentage of teens who report seeing content that promotes dieting or eating disorders, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

### Friend recommender systems

Young people’s privacy is important, and it helps to keep them safe. The design of social media features can make young people more private and safe, or less private and safe. As Meta’s own internal research highlighted, 75% of all ‘inappropriate adult-minor contact’ (i.e. ‘grooming’) on Facebook was a result of

<sup>29</sup> Common Sense Media 2020 *How Girls Really Feel About Social Media*  
[https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/how-girls-really-feel-about-social-media-researchreport\\_final\\_1.pdf](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/how-girls-really-feel-about-social-media-researchreport_final_1.pdf)



their 'People You May Know' friends recommendation feature.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, features can help keep young people safe and private; where a young person's account is defaulted to private, they are not immediately recommended as 'friends' or as accounts to 'follow' to adult strangers.

In our poll, we asked teens if either a platform's 'friend' recommender feature had recommended that they follow someone they don't know, or that someone they don't know has followed them because of this feature. Young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ appeared to be likely to be recommended to strangers to be followed; 43% of young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ being recommended a stranger to 'friend' or 'follow' every time they use social media or several times a day, compared to 35% of young people who do not identify as LGBTIQ+. While some of these may be celebrities or friends of friends, this creates real risks of contact with adult strangers that appear to particularly place young LGBTIQ+ people at additional risks.

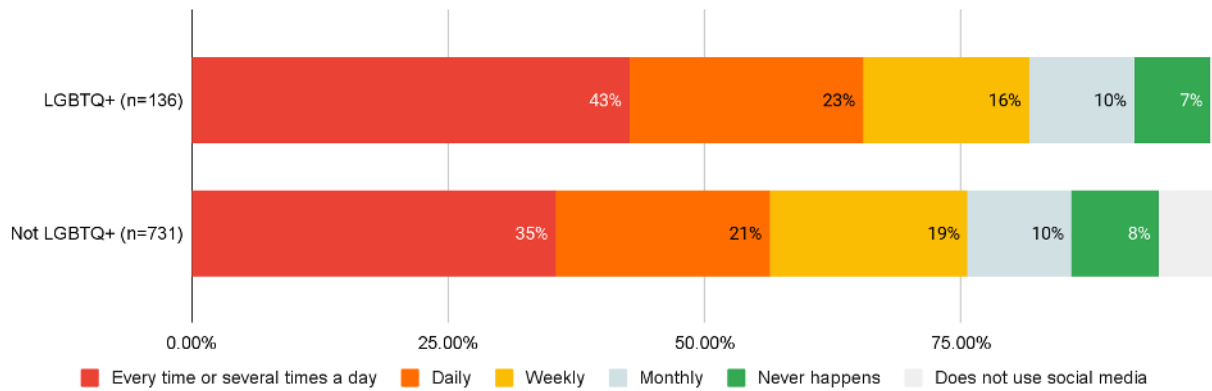


Figure 7: The percentage of teens who report that social media platforms recommend they friend or follow someone they do not know, frequency by LGBTIQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

<sup>30</sup> As made public in *Alexis Spence et al. v. Meta*, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, Case No. 3:22-cv-03294 (filed June 6, 2022) ("[Spence Complaint](#)") p. 11-12, *Growth, Friending + PYMK, and Downstream Integrity Problems*.

## Surveillance advertising

People who identify as LGBTQ+ have a long history of surveillance,<sup>31</sup> and it appears that this has continued in the digital age for young people. Much of the data harvesting that happens in the digital world is to develop profiles to serve target ads. Young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ appear to be more affected by this targeting.

We asked young people about the frequency with which they were served “stalker ads,” or ads for things they just talked about. 30% of young people who identify as LGBTQ+ reported almost always seeing ads for things they just talked about, compared to 20% of young people who did not identify as LGBTQ+.

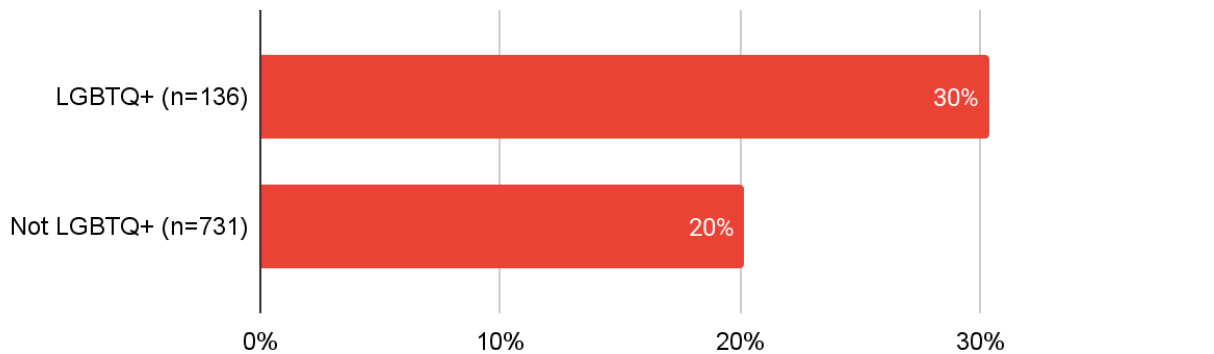


Figure 8: The percentage of teens who reported almost always seeing ads for things they just talked about, by LGBTQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

Young people who identified as LGBTQ+ were also slightly more likely to report almost always seeing ads for products they thought were unsafe

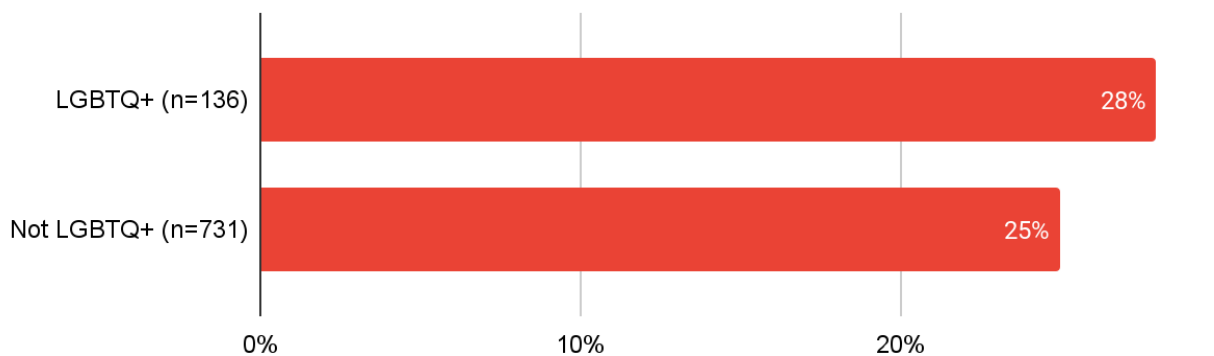


Figure 9: The percentage of teens who reported almost always seeing ads for things they think are probably unsafe, by LGBTQ+ status (Source: Polling from YouGov, March 2023)

<sup>31</sup> See for example Ian Thompson (ACLS) 2014 *Abusive Surveillance Is an LGBTQIA Rights Issue* <https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/abusive-surveillance-LGBTQIA-rights-issue>

# Conclusion

Teens overall are experiencing a number of harms online— but LGBTQIA+ youth often experience some of the worst of it. As noted in our findings, it appears that LGBTQIA+ youth are more susceptible to the endless efforts of Big Tech companies to get users to stay online and to make purchases. Furthermore, algorithmic recommendations systems put LGBTQIA+ youth in even more danger by feeding them harmful content including those that promote eating disorders and drug use.

Taken together, the protections proposed in the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) would help prevent some of the harms identified in this report. Together, these bills would:

- Impose a duty of care that would require platforms to identify potential risks to young people and take reasonable measures to prevent and mitigate harms
- Ban platforms from targeting young users with surveillance advertising
- Require platforms to build in safeguards for minors by default, such as by restricting features that encourage compulsive use and extended time online
- Limit collection of young users' data, which fuels harmful algorithmic recommendations
- Require platforms to explain to young users how their content recommender systems work and provide them with the option to 'opt-out' of personalized recommendations
- Prohibit online platforms from advertising illegal and age-inappropriate products

LGBTQIA+ youth deserve to learn and develop in a world that values them, and that includes the online world. Yet, deliberate design decisions undermine their well-being. Now is the time to hold Big Tech accountable for the harms it perpetuates against children and teens.