

The British Psychological Society- Online Safety Bill

The British Psychological Society (BPS), the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK, 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:

- The BPS believes that the duties to take measures to mitigate risk of exposure to content that is **legal but harmful** should **extended to apply 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.
- The BPS believes that **the child safety duty should be extended** so that it covers any services likely to be accessed by a child. Confining the duty to only services likely to be accessed by a “significant number” of children will still allow children to be at risk of harm.

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.

Exposure to certain content online can have pernicious 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 behaviour. Additionally, evidence [from KCL and the NHS](#) has suggested that problematic use of social media does impact suicide risk. Although the scientific investigation of these issue may be in its infancy, having such precautions in place is vital for prevention for any potential risk to harm in the future. Therefore, the Bill must be strengthened in order to protect public health.

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 be the **source of addiction** and lead to compulsive internet use and excessive chatting over time. 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). 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 years.

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.