

Testimony Remarks
Assembly Privacy and Consumer Protection Committee
Informational Hearing: *The Impact of Social Media on LGBTQ+ Youth*
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Supreet Mann, Ph.D., Director of Research, Common Sense Media

Opening

Thank you Chair Bauer-Kahan & Committee members for the opportunity to testify today. I am Dr. Supreet Mann, Director of Research at Common Sense Media. We are a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping families navigate media and technology and we have researched young people's digital lives and experiences with technology for over a decade. For LGBTQ+ young people, social media has the potential to both help and hurt — it is truly a double-edged sword, one that can be a source of community and affirmation, while also being a space of disproportionate harm. That duality is central to what I want to share today.

Section 1: Establishing a baseline of LGBTQ+ mental health concerns

- Before diving into the possible harms and benefits of social media on LGBTQ+ youth, I want to help the Committee better understand who they are when they arrive at these platforms.
 - o In 2024 Common Sense Media, along with our partners at Hopelab, conducted a nationally representative survey of over 1,200 teens and young adults ages 14-22 with oversamples of LGBTQ+ youth.
 - o Nearly half (49%) of the LGBTQ+ young people reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms, compared to a quarter of the non-LGBTQ+ peers (So roughly twice the rate of depressive symptoms for the LGBTQ+ youth).
 - o This same study found that Youth with depressive symptoms generally were significantly more vulnerable to social media harms – they are more likely to report feelings of social comparison, more likely to be exposed to harmful content and compulsive usage patterns. 64% of youth with these depressive symptoms say they feel other peoples lives are better than their own when using social media, compared to 38% of those with no symptoms.

Section 2: LGBTQ+ benefits/harms of online community

- This background of higher depressive symptomatology and the limitation of in-person community suggests that LGBTQ+ youth may be impacted by social media in a unique way. And indeed our research findings suggest the same.
 - o On the positive side, 74% of LGBTQ+ social media users say platforms are important in helping them feel less alone and 89% of LGBTQ+ youth encounter comments that celebrate LGBTQ+ identities online, with similar percentages encountering content that affirms intersectional identities and body-positive content. These communities may offer important connections and affirmation.
 - o But, as I stated at the top, this is truly a double-edged sword. Three-quarters of LGBTQ+ youth encounter homophobic comments at least sometimes with a

similar percentage reporting exposure to transphobic comments. Many queer youth, 72% in our study, also feel that public posting would expose them to harassment, suggesting that these spaces may not be promoting expression for these vulnerable young people who may instead be choosing self-censorship as a way to protect themselves.

- And platforms are often not doing enough to protect our vulnerable youth. A recent research report released by GLAAD, a non-profit focused on LGBTQ advocacy found that anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and disinformation can translate to offline harms and that platforms are largely failing to mitigate this harmful content that violates their own policies.
 - Additionally, these companies not only fail to moderate harmful anti-LGBTQ material that violates their own policies but they also frequently suppress or block legitimate LGBTQ expression. This includes wrongful takedowns of LGBTQ accounts and creators, mis-labeling of LGBTQ content as “adult” or “explicit,” and other kinds of suppression of LGBTQ voices.
 - Not only do these spaces present harm to LGBTQ+ young people, the potential benefits to them might not be amplified in the ways they should because of the design of these platforms and the limitations placed on LGBTQ+ expression.
- Across our research, the most consistent finding is that the young people who stand to gain the most from social media may be disproportionately at risk due to the harmful elements of media design. And when that harm includes hateful and possibly life threatening content, this is a tension that must be considered.

Closing

Let me close with what I think is the most important thing this committee should take from our research and my testimony: LGBTQ+ youth arrive at social media with unique vulnerabilities that must be considered. They may be carrying a greater depression burden than their peers and a lack of in-person community support. But when they arrive in these online spaces they encounter homophobic or transphobic content at high rates and many of them cannot openly express themselves without perceived risk. Platforms that are supposed to have built in protections are often not moderating harmful content and instead allowing hate speech to flourish while suppressing LGBTQ+ expression. Certainly some LGBTQ+ youth find community and affirmation online and that absolutely matters. But our data shows that the benefits they find may be hard to access, more precarious, and less protected than they should be. This same space may pose serious risks to LGBTQ+ youth due to the nature of its design. The young people who have the most to gain from social media are also, far too often, the ones most exposed to its harms.