
New EU rules needed to make digital platforms less addictive

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- Calls for ban on addictive techniques like endless scrolling or automatic play
 - Introducing a digital “right to not be disturbed” and list of good design practices
 - Young people are most vulnerable to addictive technologies
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MEPs raise alarm over the addictive design features of certain digital services and call for fostering ethical design by default.

On Wednesday, the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee adopted a draft report (with 38 votes in favour, none against and 1 abstention) warning of the addictive nature of certain digital services, such as online games, social media, streaming services, and online marketplaces, which exploit people’s vulnerabilities to capture their attention and monetise on their data.

Mental health effects

While social media can affect society in positive ways (e.g. increasing efficiency, accessibility, connectedness), its addictive design can cause physical, psychological and material harm (loss of concentration and cognitive ability, burnout, stress, depression, limited physical activity). MEPs are especially worried about the impact digital addiction has on children and adolescents, who are more vulnerable to these symptoms, and they call for more research and regulation in this area.

New EU rules needed

MEPs believe that recent rules such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Artificial

Intelligence Act are not enough to regulate the issue of addictive design. They urge the Commission to close existing legal gaps and present new legislation on the topic. If this is not addressed, they say, Parliament should use its [right of legislative initiative](#).

In addition, MEPs say harmful addictive techniques not covered by the directive on Unfair Commercial Practice (e.g. infinite scroll, default auto play, constant push and read receipt notifications) should be examined and prohibited by the Commission.

Ethical by design

MEPs want companies to be obliged to develop ethical and fair digital products and services “by design” without dark patterns, misleading, and addictive design. The Commission should put forward a digital “right not to be disturbed” and create a list of good design practices such as: “think before you share”; turning off notifications by default; chronological feeds; greyscale mode; warnings or automatic locks after a pre-set time use (in particular for minors); total screen time summaries. Education guidelines and awareness-raising campaigns should promote self-control strategies to help individuals develop safer online behaviours and healthy habits.

Quote

Rapporteur [Kim Van Sparrentak](#) (Greens/EFA, NL) said: “No self-discipline can beat the addictive design we are all subject to today. Problematic smartphones use affects attention span and brain development from a young age. This is one of the challenges of our time. If we do not intervene now, this will have an enormous impact on generations to come. We already have strong health and safety rules for food, alcohol and tobacco to protect our health. The EU must now tackle addictive design!”

Next steps

The European Commission is currently carrying out an [evaluation](#) to see if it needs to update certain consumer protection legislation to ensure a high level of protection in the digital environment. The results are expected in 2024. Parliament’s own-initiative report, once adopted in plenary, will feed into the ongoing fitness check.

Background

Addictive design features (e.g. endless scrolling, pull-to-refresh, never-ending auto-play videos, push notifications, temporarily available stories, likes, read-receipts) play on people’s vulnerabilities and desires and nudge them into spending more time on these platforms.

[Problematic smartphone or internet use](#) has been linked to lower life satisfaction and mental health symptoms such as [depression](#), [low self-esteem](#), body-image and eating disorders, anxiety, stress, neglect of family and friends, [loss of self-control](#), lack of sleep and [obsessive-compulsive symptoms](#), with [children and young people](#) being the most vulnerable. Some [research](#) also links adolescents’ problematic social media use with attention deficit hyperactivity

disorder (ADHD) symptoms.

Further information

[Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection](#)

[Procedure file](#)

[Text of the compromise amendments \(25.10.2023\)](#)

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