
New EU rules needed to address digital addiction

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- Call to ban addictive techniques like endless scrolling or automatic play
 - Moving from attention economy to ethical design
 - Introduction of digital “right to not be disturbed”
 - All online services and products must be safe for children to use
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Parliament calls for the development of ethical digital products that do not rely on dark patterns and addictive designs.

In a report adopted on Tuesday with 545 votes in favour, 12 against and 61 abstentions, MEPs warn of the addictive nature of online games, social media, streaming services, and online marketplaces, which exploit users’ vulnerabilities to capture their attention and monetise their data. They want to increase consumer protection through safer alternatives, even if these are not as profitable for social media platforms.

New EU rules needed

Parliament urges the Commission to address existing legal gaps and introduce new legislation against addictive design. If not addressed, MEPs say, Parliament should use its [right of legislative initiative](#). Their report calls for an assessment and a ban on harmful addictive techniques not covered by the directive on Unfair Commercial Practice, such as infinite scroll, default auto play, constant push and read receipt notifications.

Ethical by design

Highlighting the lack of transparency consumers and enforcers experience on online services, MEPs believe companies should be obliged to develop ethical and fair digital products and services “by design” without dark patterns, misleading, or addictive design.

To mitigate the addictive nature of platforms and empower consumers, the Commission is urged to present a digital “right not to be disturbed”. MEPs also want the Commission to create a list of good design practices like “think before you share”, turning off notifications by default, chronological feeds, greyscale mode, automatic locks, and total screen time summaries. They also propose awareness-raising campaigns to cultivate safer and healthier online habits.

Mental health effects

Acknowledging the positive effect social media can have on society, MEPs are concerned about the physical, psychological and material harm addictive design can have, including loss of concentration and cognitive ability, burnout, stress, depression, limited physical activity. They are particularly worried about the prolonged impact on minors’ health, and want more research on the risks related to online services.

Quote

Following the vote, rapporteur [Kim Van Sparrentak](#) (Greens/EFA, NL) said: “No self-discipline can beat Big Tech’s tricks, fuelled by armies of designers and psychologists to keep you glued to your screen. If we do not act now, this will have an impact on the mental health and brain development of generations to come. Today, the European Parliament sends a strong signal: the EU has to be the first in the world to tackle the addictive design of online services”.

Next steps

The European Commission is currently [evaluating](#) the need to update certain consumer protection legislation to ensure a high level of protection in the digital environment, with results are expected in 2024. Parliament’s report will feed into this ongoing fitness check.

Background

[Problematic smartphone or internet use](#) has been linked to lower life satisfaction and mental health symptoms such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, lack of sleep and obsessive-compulsive behaviour, with [children and young people](#) the most vulnerable. Young people aged 16-24 spend an average of over [seven hours a day](#) on the internet, with [one in four](#) displaying problematic smartphone use resembling addiction.

Further information

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

[Adopted text will be available here \(12.12.2023\)](#)

[EP Study: Harmful internet use - Part I: Internet addiction and problematic use](#)

[Procedure file](#)

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