MEMBERS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT CALL FOR STRONGER RULES TO PROTECT CHILDREN AND YOUTH FROM SOCIAL MEDIA RISKS

Category: Media and OTT,Privacy Law and POPIA,Privacy Law, Infosec, and POPIA
written by Kgomotso Mabena | July 23, 2026

Recently, the Members of the European Parliament ("**MEPs**") serving on the Committee on Culture and Education adopted a report, voted on by the majority (17 votes to three, with four abstentions), calling for the online environment to be governed by the principles of privacy-by-design (privacy be considered from the earliest stages of system development), safety-by-default (a principle that emphasises the importance of security in the design and operation of systems), age appropriate design, and algorithmic transparency.

Steps proposed to protect the wellbeing of minor children from social media harm

MEPs want a ban on addictive practices and insist that platforms include risk-based safeguards for their recommender systems to protect the wellbeing of children and young people from the impact of addictive and persuasive design. Further to this, they call for the Commission to introduce personal liability where there is serious and persistent non-compliance with the provisions concerning the protection of minors.

The report included the request for increased transparency around the social media algorithmic systems "as opaque algorithms and content moderation hampers the ability of young users to understand why certain content is recommended, suppressed or removed, intentionally undermining their capacity to navigate online content". Moreover, the MEPs support the introduction of a "youth

mode" disabling targeted advertising and limiting addictive design features for minors.

Regulating Influencers

MEPs also want the Commission and EU countries to develop an EU code of conduct to regulate influencers' conduct on platforms as influencers play a role in defining the "perceptions, aspirations and social attitudes of children and young people." They also call for minors to be protected from "kidfluencing", when children are turned into influences, as well as the regulation of "sharenting" when parents document their children's lives online.

Request for consistency

Additionally, MEPs, argue that the Commission must ensure consistency across all EU legal instruments, such as the General Data Protection Regulation ("**GDPR**"), the Digital Services Act ("**DSA**"), the AI act and the Digital Fairness Act ("**DFA**").

The MEPS put forward further proposals which include:

- mandatory ethical standards to prevent the manipulation of minor's emotional vulnerability with regards to "AI companions" that simulate virtual friendships;
- clear information on the materials and datasets used for AI systems;
- online platforms to mitigate the increase of AI-generated content impersonating media professionals and brands (The MEPs request that the Commission classify these as a "systemic risk"); and
- an explicit ban of AI systems that generate, manipulate or alter realistic images or videos depicting sexual content of an identifiable person without consent and synthetic child sexual abuse material.

Over 80% of young people in Europe use social media daily, with average screen time of 3 hours per day. It is against this backdrop, and with the risks posed by AI continuing to grow, that MEPs put forward these proposals to mitigate the harm posed to children's mental wellbeing and to address the privacy risks that come with growing social media use. The regulations aim to help make social media and the internet a safer environment for young people.

The own-initiative report will be put to vote on Parliament during the 14-17 September 2026 plenary session. It is important to note that this report is a non-binding recommendation to the Commission, so it remains to see what steps and decisions will be taken.