MOLLY ROSE FOUNDATION

Pervasive-by-design

Suicide, self-harm and intense depression content on TikTok and Instagram

Research briefing – August 2025

From July 2025, social media platforms have been required to comply with new measures set out in the Online Safety Act to protect children from harmful content. Just weeks before regulation took effect, our analysis found that Instagram and TikTok continued to algorithmically recommend harmful suicide, self-harm and intense depression content to teenage accounts at an industrial scale.

Almost 8 years after Molly Russell's death, online risks remain unacceptably pervasive and widespread. Molly Rose Foundation warns that Ofcom's current approach will fail to adequately respond to the pervasive and widespread risks on Instagram and TikTok. Without swift and decisive action from the Government and regulator, further young lives will be lost.

What we did

MRF's new research, Pervasive by Design, is a comprehensive analysis of suicide, self-harm and intense depression content on TikTok and Instagram. Building on previous research undertaken in November 2023, we analysed over 1,600 social media posts, using accounts opened as a 15-year-old girl, to assess the risks of exposure to harmful content.

We examined the ways in which TikTok and Instagram's engagement-based algorithms actively recommend content; how high-risk user engagement features can expose young people to harmful material; and the ease with which young people can access and discover harmful suicide, self-harm and depression posts, including through the use of hashtags. Substantive analysis took place in May and June 2025.

What we found

TikTok and Instagram continue to algorithmically recommend overwhelming volumes of harmful content

TikTok and Instagram's personalised recommender systems continue to suggest overwhelming volumes of harmful suicide, self-harm and intense depression content to teens.

On teenage accounts which had previously engaged with suicide, self-harm and intense depression material, **96% of algorithmically recommended videos on TikTok's For You Page were found to be potentially harmful, particularly if viewed cumulatively or in large amounts. 97% of short-form videos on Instagram, known as Reels, were considered potentially harmful**.

When a coroner ruled that social media played a 'not insignificant contributory role' in Molly Russell's death, we learnt that Molly had viewed around 2,000 harmful posts on Instagram in the months before she died. **Almost 8 years later, far too little has changed.** Our results show that there was still a fundamental lack of safeguards on both TikTok and Instagram in the immediate period before regulation took effect, and that children continued to be exposed to a substantial risk of reasonably foreseeable but entirely preventable harm.

High-risk design choices exacerbate the potential for children to encounter suicide, self-harm and intense depression content

In the interest of maximising user engagement, TikTok and Instagram continue to develop and use a range of high-risk features, including user interfaces and recommended search terms. The deliberate design choices dramatically increase the risk of exposure to cumulative harm (the risks that result from children being recommended and consuming large volumes of harmful content over time).

Since our previous research, TikTok has significantly increased its risk profile by introducing new AI-generated search prompts that regularly appear when a user watches or engages recommended content on the platform's For You Page. Our analysis found this feature enables users to immediately and more readily than ever enter 'rabbit holes' that significantly increase their risk of exposure to immediate or longer-term forms of cumulative harm.

During the research, this feature extensively recommended topics relating to extreme suicide, self-harm and depression material; topics which encouraged and romanticised suicide among teens; 'rabbit hole' topics ranging from self-harm tutorials to meme-style content promoting suicide methods, including methods previously unknown to the researcher; and a near-constant barrage of topics exacerbating feelings of intense misery, hopelessness and despair.

Algorithms enable suicide and self-harm content to reach vast audiences

On both TikTok and Instagram, personalised recommender systems and other high-risk design choices enable harmful content to achieve remarkably high levels of reach and user engagement, substantially increasing the risk of exposure to preventable harm. **On TikTok, the platform's algorithms enable harmful material to reach staggeringly high audiences**, with harmful posts that were algorithmically recommended on the For You Page liked by an average of over 226,000 accounts. **One in ten harmful posts on TikTok (9%) had been liked at least one million times.**

We also found evidence that more extreme forms of harmful material, including content that promoted suicide and self-harm or that explicitly referenced suicide methods, were three to eight times respectively more likely to appear in our For You Page than when we analysed the most popular content publicly accessible and discoverable through hashtags.

Both platforms appear to be 'gaming' their requirements under the Online Safety Act

During our analysis of both Instagram and TikTok, we found evidence that the platforms have started to introduce new design features to comply with their requirements under the Online Safety Act – but that the companies actively appear to be gaming the measures required of them.

Disturbingly, Instagram and TikTok have introduced a new feature which allows young people not only to offer negative feedback on content being recommended to them (as required by Ofcom's codes), but also to also offer positive feedback, including on suicide, self-harm and intense depression related posts. This results in young people being algorithmically recommended further similar content for the following 30 days.

Both TikTok and Instagram are effectively exploiting ambiguities in Ofcom's requirements, a risk first flagged by MRF last year. Despite our concerns, the regulator chose not to act. As a result, platforms have been given free rein to implement the measures as they see fit, and in this case to actively subvert the regulator's policy intentions.

Implications for the Online Safety Act

MRF has consistently been highly critical of Ofcom's sticking plaster approach to tackling algorithmic harm, with its detailed codes suggesting that tech firms need only invest £80,000 in one-off costs, and then £3,000 to £20,000 on an annual basis, to prevent algorithms from recommending the Primary Priority content that cost Molly's life - and that continues to threaten many more.

Just weeks before regulation took effect, our research provides evidence of sustained and pervasive risks in the design and operation of TikTok and Instagram. It is highly implausible to expect that Ofcom's deeply unambitious and risk averse approach will be sufficient to tackle the overwhelming scale and deeply-embedded nature of what we've found.

The regulator's ambition continues to be dwarfed by the magnitude and persistence of high-risk design features, underpinned by platform business models that actively prioritise user engagement over meaningful improvements to safety outcomes.

The findings must increase pressure on the Government and Prime Minister to take action. **While the Online Safety Act continues to be the most effective vehicle to protect children from preventable harm, further legislative strengthening is urgently required.** Despite the Technology Secretary acknowledging that the Act is 'uneven and unsatisfactory', the Government has been far too slow to commit to fixing structural weaknesses in the Act's design.

Without clear and decisive action, children will continue to be put in harm's way. We currently lose one young person aged 10-19 every week where technology plays a role. **Further delay or inaction will mean more young lives will be needlessly lost.**

For a briefing and discussion about how we can work together to tackle preventable harm, please contact hello@mollyrosefoundation.org

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