

Parents and carers

Influencers, ideology and impact: How algorithms influence and reinforce harmful beliefs

Recommender systems use personal data – such as age, preferences, and online engagement – to predict and suggest content like videos, songs, or products. Recommender systems drive the content people see on:

- **Social media** recommend posts, videos, friends, and ads based on user interactions.
- **Streaming services** recommend movies, shows, music, and videos based on viewing/listening history and preferences.
- **Gaming platforms** recommend games, content, communities, creators, in-game purchases and friends.
- **AI Chatbots** personalise responses and recommendations based on user interactions and prompts.

In these spaces content is personalised, engagement is rewarded, notifications bring users back and autoplay and infinite scroll make it easy to keep us engaged. None of these features are inherently harmful, but they do shape what people (especially children and teens) see and experience online.

For younger children, the same principles apply across YouTube Kids, streaming services, apps and games. And while age settings and child specific environments can help, they're not foolproof. Content that looks child-friendly isn't always child-appropriate, and familiar characters, themes and graphics can sometimes be used to attract attention or evade moderation.

Tactics used to boost engagement:

Some creators deliberately promote and create content that is inflammatory, extreme or polarising for financial gain or wider audiences. They use tactics like:

- **Rage bait**, which is content designed to provoke outrage, arguments or strong reactions.



- **Targeted hashtags** to place their content in front of specific audiences, even if the content isn't really about that topic. This is also how some age-inappropriate content may be accessed by younger users.
- **Using fake followers**, bots, or coordinated networks to artificially boost engagement.

It's all designed to broaden the creator's reach and hold your attention for longer.

The influence loop

- User behaviour provides signals: your likes, comments, follows, shares, watch time, pauses and searches all provide data to the platform.
- The system learns: recommender systems analyse signals to predict what is most likely to capture attention and keep users engaged.
- Content is repeated and reinforced: similar content, creators, messages and ideas are recommended more often, becoming increasingly visible over time.
- Exposure shapes perceptions: repeated exposure can influence interests, experiences, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, often gradually rather than dramatically.
- New interactions create new signals: every view, click, pause or engagement provides additional data to the platform.
- The cycle repeats: the system continues learning, refining recommendations and reinforcing patterns of engagement.

How ideas spread online

- It often starts with a genuine interest, a creator, game, meme, hobby or topic a young person is curious about. Recommender systems build on that interest. Platforms identify patterns in behaviour and recommend related content, creators and communities.
- Ideas are often shared in engaging ways through humour, memes, irony which can make messages feel relatable, harmless or easy to share. Coded language, symbols and inside jokes can create a sense of belonging and group identity.
- Content moves across platforms. The same themes may appear in videos, social media feeds, gaming spaces, group chats and online communities.

The role of influencers

Influencers and content creators can shape beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that can affect how young people think about identity, relationships, success, appearance and belonging.

- **Influence isn't always intentional.** Some creators may simply be sharing their experiences, opinions or lifestyle, but audiences can still absorb messages about what is normal, desirable or acceptable.
- **Young people often form connections with creators.** Regular exposure can create a sense of familiarity and trust, making creators powerful role models and sources of information.

- **Influence can be positive or negative.** Creators can inspire creativity, learning, confidence and connection. They can also reinforce stereotypes, unrealistic expectations or harmful attitudes.
- **Algorithms can amplify influence.** They promote content that generates engagement, and increase exposure to creators, messages and viewpoints.

The invisible influence of algorithms

When used well, algorithms and recommender systems can help young people discover content, learning tools, and activities that match their interests and needs.

Understanding how the systems may influence adolescents is critical for fostering healthier digital interactions.

Over time exposure can lead to:

- **Dependency:** features like infinite scrolling and autoplay encourage compulsive use, making it harder for adolescents to disconnect.
- **Misleading content:** algorithms may promote false or harmful information, distorting young people's understanding of important issues.
- **Distorted reality:** content 'rabbit holes' and 'echo chambers' can reinforce harmful attitudes and unrealistic expectations about life, relationships, and success.
- **Risky interactions:** algorithms may steer young users toward unsafe individuals or communities.
- **Unrealistic ideals:** some content promotes harmful beauty standards and sexualisation.
- **Harmful beliefs:** exposure to hate, misogyny, racism, or violent ideologies can shape harmful worldviews.

Recommender systems learn from user behaviour and large datasets. If these datasets reflect stereotypes or social inequalities, the system can reinforce and perpetuate harmful biases and beliefs. They can also contain gender stereotypes or unequal representations; the systems can reinforce harmful norms and expectations.

- **Girls and young women** may be disproportionately exposed to content that emphasises appearance, beauty standards, or sexualised imagery, which can affect self-esteem and body image.
- **Boys and young men** may be steered toward aggressive, hyper-masculine, or emotionally suppressive content, reinforcing narrow ideas of masculinity.
- **Gender-diverse and non-binary youth** often face invisibility or misrepresentation, with algorithms failing to reflect their identities or pushing content that invalidates their experiences.

Talk about online content

Talk with children and teens about their online experiences starts with simple, curious conversations.

- **Ask about their sources.** Begin by asking where they get information about various topics, for example, news, food, fitness, or wellbeing. This helps you understand what might be influencing them and opens the door to discussing credible and trustworthy sources.
- **Explore credibility together.** Encourage them to think critically, ask questions like ‘Is this person qualified to give advice?’ or ‘Does this seem realistic?’ This helps build their ability to spot misleading content and promotes a healthier self-image.
- **Balance the algorithm.** Recommender systems can lead young people down narrow content paths or ‘rabbit holes’. Use your discussions as a chance to explore more balanced, reliable sources together and talk about how algorithms shape what they see.

These conversations reassure young people that they’re supported rather than judged and give them the skills and confidence to navigate online spaces more safely and thoughtfully.

Retrain your algorithms and recommender systems

The following strategies can help children, teens, and adults alike, to retrain the content encountered online.

- **Be mindful and intentional** by paying attention to the messages you are sending to platforms when engaging with content online.
- **Use platform tools** to customise content suggestions by using features such as ‘not interested’, ‘dislike’ or ‘hide’.
- **Support what you like** by actively engaging with content that you enjoy, for example liking, sharing and commenting on content you enjoy.
- **Diversify your content** by actively seeking out diverse perspectives and information and exploring different topics, creators and content.
- **Start fresh** by resetting your app preferences from time to time, allowing you to rebuild your recommendations with intention.

eSafety resources

[An unfair fight – how algorithms are shaping our adolescents | eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Recommender systems and algorithms – position statement | eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Parents | eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Education | eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Young People | eSafety Commissioner](#)

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