Supporting online safety through regulatory experimentation
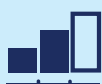
Protecting users from harmful online content – Ofcom

Level:	Industry:	Location:
Moderate	**Communications**	**UK**

Overview

Content controls are an important tool offered by online platforms that allow users to limit the types of content they are shown. Ofcom partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to conduct two trials to better understand how information and options presented to users influences their use of content controls.

Key finding 1

Showing information with examples of sensitive content on the decision page encouraged more users to choose stricter content controls.

Key finding 2

Prompts encouraged users to check their content settings.

Outcome

Findings contribute to evidence on online safety and media literacy.

Evaluation method

Randomised control trial.

Want more regulatory experimentation resources?
Go to productivity.nsw.gov.au/regulatory-policy

Want help designing your own experiment?
Go to productivity.nsw.gov.au/contact-us

Background

Ofcom wanted to build evidence on how platform choice architecture affects engagement with social media content controls.

Ofcom is the regulator for online safety in the UK, under the *Online Safety Act 2023*. Also, Ofcom has a duty to promote media literacy and regulates UK established video-sharing platforms, with respect to rules protecting users from harmful content. Enabling people to take control of their online experiences is important for media literacy and online safety. Content controls, which allow users to reduce the amount of sensitive content they see, are one important tool offered by social media platforms. Behavioural research demonstrates that the way platforms design and present their services and tools ('the choice architecture') shapes how users respond. Ofcom wanted to explore how choice architecture affects engagement with content controls among adults.

Intervention and outcome

## User decisions on content controls were heavily susceptible to the way that choice was presented.

Ofcom partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to conduct two randomised control trials using a mock social media platform. The two trials targeted different stages in the user journey.

The first trial explored the choice of content controls ('all content' or 'reduced sensitive content') when setting up a new social media account. Users were randomly assigned to one of five groups to test the impact of a) pre-selecting a default option, and b) varying how information and choice options are presented. Presenting information with examples of sensitive content on the decision page increased the selection of 'reduced sensitive content' to 29% from 24% in the control condition. When 'all content' was pre-selected, only 15% opted for 'reduced sensitive content'.

The second trial tested whether prompts encourage users to check content settings while browsing, and the impact of prompt timing and message. Prompts increased the proportion of users checking their settings to 17%–23% (4% checked their settings without a prompt).

The prompt which led to the greatest increase in users checking their settings emphasised the ease of changing settings and was sent after a user disliked a sensitive post.

Key steps for successful experiments
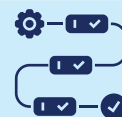
✓ **Establish a process to identify barriers and develop interventions.**

Ofcom followed a structured process to identify priority areas and develop interventions. This included conducting initial desk research, running internal workshops and prioritisation exercises as well as leveraging existing behavioural frameworks and taxonomies.

Consider developing a structured process grounded in established frameworks and practices.

✓ **Improve internal research capability.**

Ofcom's dedicated Behavioural Insight Hub played a crucial role in developing this experiment.

Consider establishing a similar research unit to enhance internal research quality and experimental capabilities.

Creating evidence-based guidance

The results of these trials gave Ofcom a set of insights into how users make decisions about their content settings and the way those choices are shaped by platform design. This work builds on the evidence base for Ofcom's online safety work related to content controls. It also contributes to Ofcom's research on on-platform interventions to promote media literacy and informed the Best Practice Design Principles for Media Literacy.