



The Honorable Amy Walen
Chair
House Consumer Protection & Business
110 Legislative Building
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Stephanie McClintock
House Consumer Protection & Business
110 Legislative Building
Olympia, WA 98504

April 1, 2025

Dear Chair Walen, Ranking Member McClintock, and Members of the Committee:

The American Consumer Institute is an independent education and research organization that promotes consumer-focused free-market solutions to state and federal policy challenges. A series of perceived harms caused by social media has sparked lawmakers across the country to address the noble cause of child online safety. Unfortunately, the policies within Washington's *addictive feed* legislation are poorly defined, vague, legally dubious, and likely to create a series of unfortunate unintended consequences.

First, the legislation defines an *addictive feed* as an "internet website, online service, online application, or mobile application" that is "recommended, selected, or prioritized" based "on information provided by the user, or otherwise associated with the user or the user's device." That definition of addiction is vague and does not rely on traditional indicators of addiction, such as dependency. Instead, it assumes without evidence that content recommendations based on user information are *inherently* addictive. Even if the legislation were to adjust the definition to clarify a dependence of some kind, it is still unclear that social media would meet the medical definition of addiction.

As Jeff Singer, MD writes for the Cato Institute: "Addiction has a biopsychosocial basis with a genetic predisposition and involves neurotransmitters and interactions within reward centers of the brain. The interaction of these factors has not been established with respect to social media use."¹ Gambling disorder is the only behavioral disorder currently recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) because it includes relevant side effects like withdrawals when the attachment is severed,² which is unlikely to occur when social media use stops.³

The vague definition of *addictive feed* may also cast a wider net of applicability than intended. The food review website, Yelp, for example, may meet this definition of addictive feed because the website curates content based on location and information about previous interactions. Yet, few Americans would consider Yelp an *addictive* service. Washington lawmakers should amend the definition to narrow the scope of the legislation so that it is not stretched beyond its intent.

¹ Jeffrey A. Singer, "Stop Saying Social Media 'Addiction'," Medpage Today, September 20, 2018, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/stop-saying-social-media-addiction>.

² American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), Last visited January 24, 2025, <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/dsm>.

³ Haley Weiss, "Scientists Can't Decide if Social Media is Addictive," Time, November 9, 2023, <https://time.com/6333257/social-media-addiction-study/>.

Second, the bill relies on incomplete information about the underlying relationship between social media use and mental health. A Consensus Study Report by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine finds the relationship between social media and adolescent mental health is “mixed and inconclusive.”⁴ It is unsurprising then that even research by famous researcher Jonathan Haidt describes only a measly 0.17 correlation between social media and declining mental health.⁵ Anything below 0.2 is considered weak.⁶ As more researchers study the issue—and as different kinds of social media proliferate—more evidence will be discovered, and a more conclusive relationship may be established. Until then, lawmakers should understand that the evidence is inconclusive and therefore approach the issue with caution.

Third, requiring parental consent means platforms may need to collect more sensitive information to verify the age of everyone that uses their platform, thereby inadvertently exposing users to increased privacy risk as the attack surface for nefarious actors increases. And since even adults will need to verify that they are not children—and therefore not in need of parental consent—their privacy too may be impacted.

Finally, the legislation is justified on legally dubious grounds that invite legal challenges if the bill were to become law. Washington is not the first state to introduce legislation to curb *addictive* online feeds. California passed similar legislation, which was partially⁷ blocked in December and is now fully blocked while courts deliberate.⁸

Not every unintended consequence can be anticipated and averted, but with so much uncertainty about the definitions in the bill, a risk of undermining user privacy, and a legal future likely to be challenged in court, the state of Washington should reconsider the policies within the bill entirely. The least the General Assembly should do is pause any debate on the matter until the legal fate of similar legislation in other states is decided and more information on the relationship between social media use and addiction is established.

Sincerely,

Logan Kolas
Director of Technology Policy
American Consumer Institute

⁴ Social Media and Adolescent Health, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2024. Social Media and Adolescent Health, Chapter 4. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/27396>.

⁵ Tirzah Duren, “KOSA: A Solution in Search of a Problem,” *Washington Times*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/jul/23/kosa-solution-in-search-of-problem/>.

⁶ Spyridon N Papageorgiou, “On Correlation Coefficients and their Interpretation,” National Library of Medicine, Aug 26, 2022; 49(3):359–361. doi: [10.1177/14653125221076142](https://doi.org/10.1177/14653125221076142).

⁷ NetChoice, Plaintiff, v. Rob Bonta, Defendant. Order Granting in Part and Denying In Part Motion for Preliminary Injunction, Case No. 5:24-cv-07885-EJD, Last visited January 24, 2025, <https://netchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/NetChoice-v-Bonta-2024-SB-976-Ruling-Granting-Preliminary-Injunction-in-Part-Dec-31-2024.pdf>.

⁸ Maki Depalo and Hyun Jai Oh, “Cour Enjoins enforcement of California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act, Alston & Bird, March 17, 2025, [Court Enjoins Enforcement of California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act | Alston & Bird Privacy, Cyber & Data Strategy Blog](https://www.alstonandbird.com/enjoins-enforcement-of-california-age-appropriate-design-code-act/).