



**Testimony of Zamaan Qureshi,
Co-Chair of Design It For Us**

Vermont Senate Committee on Institutions
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Chair Harrison, Vice Chair Plunkett, and members of the Committee on Institutions. Thank you for inviting me to express my support for the Vermont Kids Code, SB 69.

My name is Zamaan Qureshi, I am 22 years old, and the co-chair of [Design It For Us](#), a coalition of youth activists from across the country driving state and federal policy to protect kids and teens online. Our coalition is comprised of over 200 members from across the country and around the world, including members in Vermont. I co-founded the organization in March of 2023, but before the existence of our coalition the then-Design It For Us campaign successfully advocated for the California Age-Appropriate Design Code, which passed the California State Legislature unanimously and was signed into law in 2022. Last year, Design It For Us helped support the successful passage of the Kids Code in Maryland, and supported Vermont's strong fight last year to get its own Kids Code over the finish line.

We are proud to see lawmakers stepping up again in Vermont and around the country, to introduce and push age-appropriate design legislation. In lieu of federal standards protecting young people online, states must lead in this area and deliver legislation that tackles Big Tech's harmful business practices that addict and prey upon young people. The Vermont Kids Code is the first step to holding Big Tech accountable. Under the Code, companies must set all defaults to the strictest privacy settings, design products for the safest experience for kids, stop tracking kids without notice, stop using kids' data to target detrimental material to them and provide privacy tools for kids to take agency over their digital experience. These compliance measures put the onus on Big Tech, not on kids or their parents, to do what they should have done years ago, and design their products for us.

The young activists and advocates I represent have been advocating across the country over the past two years to encourage lawmakers to adopt reforms like the Kids Code that implement safety by design and privacy by default guidelines for Big Tech companies to follow. These are young people who have taken time out of their school days, testified before their state legislature, flown to Washington D.C., held rallies, and much more all because social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, and others have failed to self-regulate. They've failed to convince us that their products are safe or uphold the promise that they would protect us from the damage they've created.

We are all too familiar with the harms of these platforms. It's an unfortunate reality that we and our peers are hooked on platforms we don't have the tools to get off of. And worse, some of our peers have experienced the gravest harms whether it's the development of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, or worse, suicide.

I am part of a generation that has grown up almost entirely online. In middle school, many of us received our first smartphones and got on social media. Snapchat and Instagram were the apps of choice that allowed us to communicate outside of school, form community, and connect with people we might not otherwise have ever met. There is little doubt that social media has had tremendous benefits for our generation. But that's not why we are here. We're here to discuss the darker sides of social media and Big Tech's addictive algorithms that hooked those middle schoolers from a young age and kept them scrolling.

Big Tech companies like Meta, which owns Instagram and Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, and others make their money through serving users ads. Those ads are presented alongside organic content posted by users to the platform. Big Tech utilizes opaque algorithms to decide how to serve content in a feed or connect users to one another. Algorithms use personal information and users' data based on how they interact with both the platform and other users on the platform to decide which content to serve. Over time, Big Tech's algorithms have become more and more precise in serving content to users, keeping people on the platform longer. Users see more ads and the platforms end up collecting more revenue. The system is self-reinforcing and has been coined "[surveillance capitalism](#)," where addictive algorithms keep a user enticed while collecting even more data about them to keep them scrolling even longer the next time they come back. In addition, Big Tech has employed addictive features and what's known as "[dark patterns](#)" to reinforce its algorithms. These include endless scroll, autoplay, defaulting new accounts to public, hiding or obscuring privacy controls, and capitalizing on the amount of information they can collect on a user.

Amidst all this, two years ago the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [advisory](#) expressing concern about the impact of social media in conjunction with a growing fear about the youth mental health crisis in America. I'm here to speak on behalf of my generation for the harm we've experienced. Some of our generation have developed depression, eating disorders, and attempted or taken their life due to social media. But there is also a large majority of American kids and teens who have simply felt worse about themselves because of social media. They all deserve protection.

I got into this work because of the impact I was seeing on my peers. Since middle school, I have watched as Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and others have evolved into dark spaces. Yes, they have connected friends and fostered community, nobody is arguing that. But at what cost? I have watched as peers—regardless of gender—developed anxiety, depression, and body image concerns in part or in full due to content they were repeatedly fed on social media. When the Facebook whistleblower [Frances Haugen](#) came forward, I watched as the country, shocked by her findings, tried to grapple with solutions but failed to listen to young people and our perspectives. Since September of 2021 when Haugen came forward, I have been advocating on behalf of my generation.

Vermont has an opportunity to offer much-needed protection immediately by enacting the Kids Code. This is a common-sense consumer protection bill that would ensure that digital products, just like physical ones, are safe and private at the point of design. We have a responsibility and obligation to put in place guardrails that make these platforms safer. Big Tech has skirted regulation for far too long, [pouring tens of millions of dollars to stop it](#), employing thousands of lobbyists, and relying on [trade organizations](#) who somehow claim to have the country's best interest in mind all to make sure that governments fail to regulate their companies. Big Tech has repeatedly told the public to "trust us" but has failed to heed their promises. Internal documents and conversations brought forward by Ms. Haugen have shown that the industry time and again when presented with opportunities to make their platforms safer, chose profit over privacy and safety. The era of self-regulation is over. Big Tech has lost the public's trust.

The Kids Code does not require companies to change their moderation standards or prevent people from searching for content. And is good for businesses, allowing for continued innovation.

I hope you'll find my perspective to be helpful as you listen to the next round of testimony today.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I look forward to answering your questions.