SUMMARY

At social media and gaming companies, the user is the constant focus—at least in theory. How to get them to use this platform more? To stay longer? To come back tomorrow? Attention and resources are poured into answering these questions throughout the industry. That same attention and those same resources are not, however, put toward the well-being of a major group of their users: young people. This report asks: How do social media platform companies think about and design for the well-being of young people? Through a multi-year, qualitative research project interviewing tech company insiders in a variety of roles, we learned:

● **Many tech company workers tell us their companies treat adolescents' use of their products as an afterthought.** Given the widespread presence of adolescents on these platforms, we view this as a lost opportunity. Designing products with adolescents' health and well-being in mind will both address their particular developmental needs and improve the experience for all users.

● Defining what counts as digital well-being for adolescents, and the harms arising from social platforms, is a difficult task with no current consensus. Given the subjectivity of what counts as "healthy," many working on these topics focus on metrics like screen time rather than more holistic understandings of well-being.

Instead, **companies and regulators must recognize that the impacts of social platform use vary for different subgroups of adolescents.** While many adolescents have positive or neutral experiences on social platforms, a smaller subset face significant harm. Reducing the potential for harms associated with social platforms, and actively promoting digital well-being, requires specific attention to these subgroups.

● Companies struggle to address digital well-being for adolescents because they design for an imagined "average" user. **Averages miss the full range of user experiences on social platforms, and can hide major impacts of those platforms.** Designing a product for the average user can lead to an outcome that doesn't fit anyone well. Instead, explicitly designing products to mitigate negative impacts for smaller subgroups of users, like adolescents, will make that product better for everyone.

● **Many companies employ strategic forms of ignorance to abdicate responsibility** for how subgroups of users, like adolescents or minoritized populations, may be negatively impacted by their platform. By refusing to explicitly collect demographic data about users (while often simultaneously monitoring their behavior to target advertisements), siloing concern for

well-being to peripheral teams, or by fracturing responsibility for well-being across multiple disempowered groups of workers, companies reduce their liability for the harms of their platforms.

● **Company structures, cultures, and incentives do not prioritize adolescent or general user well-being.** When companies do incorporate well-being into design processes, it is often too late to make major changes. Business models that incentivize exponential growth, product stickiness, and "average user" metrics also make it difficult to center adolescent well-being. In addition to harming user well-being, this can lead to companies facing strings of negative publicity and threats of regulation once harms to adolescents become public.

● **Both outside actors and workers within tech companies can improve adolescent well-being on social platforms.** Use these links to access our full list of recommendations for:

o [Social Platform Companies and Workers](#)

   • Create targeted approaches and policies for adolescent users that empower them and allow for learning and rehabilitation among young people. Consider alternatives to age-gating and repeated parental consent.

   • Remember the humans. Consider a broad range of user sub-groups when developing new features and products, and ensure that company employees represent user diversity. Intentionally

design and promote the desired environment and culture on a platform.

   • Integrate expertise about user well-being into product teams at every point in the design process and across all roles.

   • Hire, retain, and empower a diverse workforce, which includes providing safe avenues for critique, mitigating racism, and allowing employees to organize.

o [Regulators and Civil Society](#)

   • Judiciously applied outside pressure—from civil society and the media, especially when combined with public corporate missteps and personal tragedies—can help spur a change within companies and provide a more nuanced outlook on adolescent health and well-being.

   • Regulation can be helpful, but requires careful thought about unintended effects. Poorly-designed regulation leads companies to focus on narrow definitions of harms, or drives them away from products that address adolescent needs.