



February 13, 2024

Dear Chair Beidle and members of the Senate Finance Committee

I am Dr. Henry Willis, a licensed clinical psychologist and assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Maryland at College Park. I also lead the African American Health Equity Lab at UMD College Park, where we examine how sociocultural risk (i.e., experiences of racial discrimination) and protective factors (e.g., positive racial identity beliefs, social support, etc.) impact the mental health of African American and Latinx youth. Notably, my research lab also seeks to reduce health disparities in mental health access and engagement among underserved populations. In this vein, I specialize in exploring how social media experiences impact the mental health and development of African American and Latinx youth, and have over 10 years of clinical and research experience advancing this topic in the field of clinical psychology. I am writing today to share my strong support for SB 571, Consumer Protection – Online Products and Services – Data of Children, known as the Maryland Kids Code. I also greatly appreciate Senators Kramer, Hester and West for introducing this important legislation.

Engagement with social media sites are common among youth that have both risks and benefits for their mental health, and it is important to find ways to regulate their experiences online. More importantly, we know that Black and Latinx youth tend to use social media platforms more than youth in other racial-ethnic groups¹. As a result, they are at a higher risk of negative online experiences, especially racism, or experiencing discrimination online. Research over the last 15 years produced by myself and other scholars in the field have shown that increased experiences of online racism (i.e., being attacked on social media due to their racial-ethnic group membership, being sent racist images online, and viewing traumatic videos online that are race-related in nature such as the murder of Freddie Gray, George Floyd, etc.), can lead to a host of negative mental health outcomes for these youth, including increased anxiety, depression, PTSD, and even suicidal ideation symptoms²⁻⁷. Given recent social and political events and the current sociopolitical climate, these experiences of online racism have increased exponentially among Black and Latinx youth, with some youth reporting having up to 5 experiences of racial discrimination a day, with most of those experiences occurring in online spaces⁶⁻⁷. Together, this research highlights the urgent need for increased protections for youth of color in online and social media spaces.

Common-sense protections as proposed by the legislation (and which have already been implemented in the UK), such as time restrictions and turning off push notifications during certain hours, could greatly reduce the risk that Black and Latinx youth might experience racial discrimination online or be experience racist bullying or harassment on social media platforms. Requiring companies to have clear and relevant community standards could also help youth of color and their parents learn about resources to cope with these negative race-related experiences that occur in online spaces. Furthermore, increased privacy settings and preventing companies from manipulating the design of social media sites can further protect youth of color from these negative exposures.

Although Black and Latinx youth inhabit a digital world that can have some positive effects, there is considerable evidence that they have unique risks (i.e., exposure to online racism) that must be accounted for when considering how to improve their internet safety. If not, we run the risk of further increasing disparities in mental health outcomes for Black and Latinx youth, as they may experience more distress online but have less resources (both online and offline) to learn how to cope with these experiences. As a result, myself and the African American Mental Health Equity Lab urge a favorable vote on SB 571, Maryland Kids Code. We believe that this legislation would provide common-sense protections for the Maryland's Black and Latinx youth, giving them the opportunity to thrive in an ever-evolving digital world.

Thank you for your consideration.

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