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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6275

April 16, 2025

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

Mr. Mark Zuckerberg
 Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
 Meta Platforms, Inc.

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

In today's increasingly digital era, our young people are facing more dangers as a result of big tech placing profits over common decency. On January 31, 2024, you came before the Judiciary Committee as part of a hearing to hold big tech accountable.¹ The hearing revealed that Meta's research found Instagram is harmful to a large percentage of teenagers, particularly teenage girls.² Additionally, according to the Meta study, "teens blame Instagram for increases in anxiety."³ To address these issues and others, on February 19, 2025, as Chairman of the Judiciary Committee, I held a hearing titled "Children's Safety in the Digital Era: Strengthening Protections and Addressing Legal Gaps."⁴

Recently, Ms. Sarah Wynn-Williams approached my office with whistleblower allegations regarding Meta and the company's use of targeted ads. Specifically, Ms. Wynn-Williams stated that Meta targeted 13-17 year-old girls with advertisements when they felt depressed or self-conscious.⁵ According to her allegations, Meta was able to identify when a child took down a selfie or used key words indicating they were feeling depressed.⁶ Meta would then allegedly tell advertisers so they could sell their products to that individual.⁷ For instance, according to Ms. Wynn-Williams, if a teen girl took down a selfie, advertisers would target the teen with weight loss supplements and beauty products.⁸

In response to the allegations raised by Ms. Wynn-Williams, Meta has consistently pointed to a 2017 statement it made responding directly to an article alleging that Facebook targeted ads based on emotional states.⁹ According to the company's own statement, "Facebook does not offer tools to target people based on their emotional state."¹⁰ However, according to records obtained by my office, this statement appears misleading.¹¹ Specifically, according to text messages between then-Facebook

¹ *Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis*, Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, 118 Cong. (Jan. 31, 2024), at 2:19:00-2:21:00, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/childrens-safety-in-the-digital-era-strengthening-protections-and-addressing-legal-gaps> (According to the study, Instagram makes body image issues worse for 1 in 3 girls.).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Children's Safety in the Digital Era: Strengthening Protections and Addressing Legal Gaps*, Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, 119 Cong. (Feb. 19, 2025) <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/committee-activity/hearings/childrens-safety-in-the-digital-era-strengthening-protections-and-addressing-legal-gaps>.

⁵ Sarah Perez, *Meta whistleblower Sarah Wynn-Williams says company targeted ads at teens based on their 'emotional state'* (Apr. 9, 2025), Yahoo! Finance, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/meta-whistleblower-sarah-wynn-williams-214239975.html>; Notes on file with Committee Staff.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*; Sam Machkovech, *Report: Facebook helped advertisers target teens who feel "worthless"* [Updated] (May 1, 2017), arsTechnica, <https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2017/05/facebook-helped-advertisers-target-teens-who-feel-worthless/>.

¹⁰ Meta, *Comments on Research and Ad Targeting* (Apr. 30, 2017), <https://about.fb.com/news/h/comments-on-research-and-ad-targeting/>.

¹¹ Exhibit 1 and 2.

employees, an employee at Facebook stated, “[y]es, I looked at one list of research topics and saw one about young mothers and their emotional state.”¹² Later in the messages, the same employee states, “i think it’s a slippery slope here... because there is some level of [behavioral] targeting.”¹³ Another text thread contained communications between employees discussing Facebook’s response to an article from *The Australian* about Facebook targeting children. In that text thread, then-Vice President for Global Public Policy at Facebook, Joel Kaplan, asked the question “[w]e can’t confirm that we don’t target on the basis of insecurity or how someone is feeling?” which elicited a response by Rob Sherman, then-Deputy Chief Privacy Officer, “[t]hat’s correct, unfortunately.”¹⁴

So that Congress may conduct objective and independent oversight of Meta’s use of targeted ads and its impact on young people, please provide answers to the following no later than April 30, 2025:

1. Are the text messages accurate? Does Meta use targeted advertisements based on emotional state? If so, why? If not, explain in detail.
2. Provide all research Meta has completed on targeted advertisements, including the names of the projects and the demographics of the individuals who were targeted.
3. Provide all records between Meta and companies it allows to place advertisements on its platforms, including all communications about targeted advertisements for children, teenagers, and others based on their emotional state, as well as the contracts with those companies.¹⁵
4. Provide all records relating to targeted advertisements towards children and teenagers.

Thank you for your prompt review and response. If you have any questions, please contact Tucker Akin with my Committee staff at (202) 224-5225.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
Chairman
Committee on the Judiciary

¹² Exhibit 1.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ Exhibit 2.

¹⁵ “Records” include any written, recorded, or graphic material of any kind, including letters, memoranda, reports, notes, electronic data (emails, email attachments, and any other electronically created or stored information), calendar entries, inter-office communications, meeting minutes, phone/voice mail or recordings/records of verbal communications, and drafts (whether they resulted in final documents).

EXHIBIT 1

< 2

But your understanding is that there is other research related to young mothers?

Yes, I looked at one list of research topics and saw one about young mothers and their emotional state

Ok- I'll flag on other thread

I am trying to confirm if that list is the only list

Just need to be aware for comment

Before finalising the assessment

Look at email I added you to

Also wondering about asking my apparently morally bankrupt colleagues if they are aware of any more

You should



[Redacted] who is cited in

This person is unavailable on Messenger.

More options

< 2

any more

You should

who is cited in the article has three children - I talked him through his kid being bullied - what was he thinking?

30 APR 2017 AT 21:53

Do you think statement is strong enough?

yes

i think it's a slippery slope here

How?

because there is some level of behavior **targeting**

+ we don't know what other research is out there yet

I'm just looking back through the ANZ FYI group at Lara's posts that use the word "motion"

she and Iorn proudly landed this

This person is unavailable on Messenger.

More options

because there is some level of
behavioural **targeting**

+ we don't know what other
research is out there yet

I'm just looking back through the
ANZ FYI group at Lara's posts
that use the word emotion

she and Jorn proudly landed this
coverage: [http://
www.bandt.com.au/technology/
facebook-and-tns-research](http://www.bandt.com.au/technology/facebook-and-tns-research)



How Brands Can Tap Into Aussie & Kiwis Emotions: Facebook Research

it's because of her posts to the
group that i had a bad feeling in
my stomach about what was
happening



30 APR 2, AT 23:58

This person is unavailable on Messenger.

More options

EXHIBIT 2

Joel

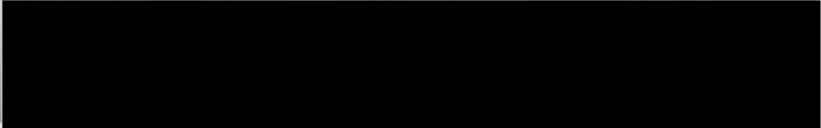
We can't confirm that we don't target on basis of insecurity or how someone is feeling?

Rob

That's correct, unfortunately. We have minutiae (ex., you post and say "feeling excited") and can use those + keywords to detect sentiment. (The normal use for this is to learn whether, for example, ads for Pepsi are making people communicate more positively about Pepsi.)

We don't expose this capability in targeting tools. Marketing Science has the ability to create custom clusters for particular advertisers. While they should not be using this type of insights to create custom clusters -- and certainly should not be doing so for minors -- the work is decentralized, so I would not be comfortable saying categorically that we don't do this without investigating further.





(There is clearly some process work we need to do coming out of this with Marketing Science.)

