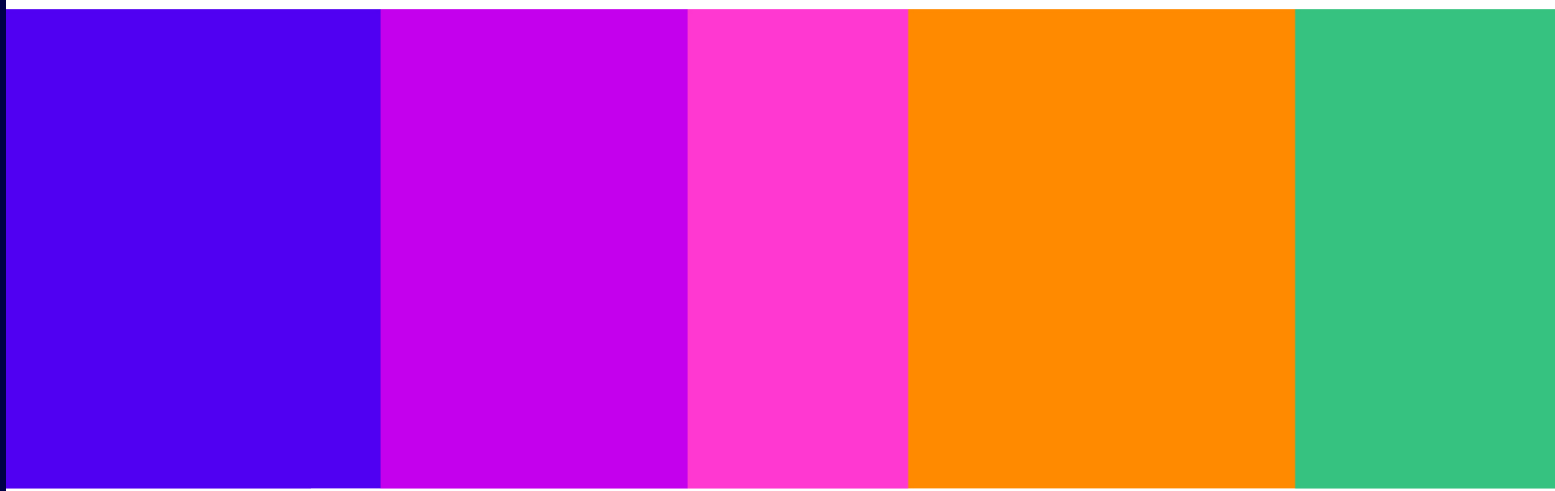


Behavioural Audit of Livestreaming Services:

Key Findings Report

Report

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Overview

This report summarises the research conducted by Ofcom’s Behavioural Insight Hub to examine how livestreaming service design influences user behaviour and online safety, for users watching and creating livestreams. This research was undertaken to support the development of regulatory codes of practice under the UK Online Safety Act (OSA) related to Livestreaming. It is also relevant to recent announcements by the [UK Government](#) that will prevent under-16s from creating livestreams. Livestreaming features will remain available to 16 and 17-year-olds but will be restricted by default.

We conducted the behavioural audit on Instagram, TikTok, Twitch, and YouTube. We chose these services because many young people use them to livestream. A behavioural audit systematically assesses how service design features influence user decision-making, behaviour and online safety.

During fieldwork, conducted November 2025 – March 2026, we found:

- Sign-up flows were designed for speed and may encourage rapid completion, and researchers were not required to complete an age check using methods set out in our highly effective age assurance [guidance](#) at sign up.
- Content played automatically for users before they could select what to watch; design features guided users towards livestreams through visual cues. There were some protections for younger users to reduce the likelihood of encountering livestreams.
- The set-up of livestreams was easy, and safety tools could be skipped over before going live. Hard-to-find end-stream controls, prompts to continue, and goal-oriented summaries of livestreams could reduce control and encourage longer livestreams, even where stopping may be safer.
- Highly visible interaction and gifting features may act as rewards and encourage longer engagement, while showing younger users restricted features risked making those features more appealing and inviting workarounds.
- Safety tools exist on all the services, but had low visibility, effortful reporting routes and defaults that normalised low safety. This may make them less likely to be used, especially at the point of harm, reducing both immediate protections for users and a service’s awareness of risks.

The findings highlight the importance of considering livestreaming safety as a system-wide design issue, rather than relying primarily on the availability of individual tools or user action. Users are more likely to follow the easiest and most visible path. Therefore, livestreaming safety depends not only on whether tools are available, but on whether services make safer choices easy, timely and prominent across the whole user journey.

While this research delivers important insights into services’ design features, it only provides a snapshot of service design and practices at a specific point in time and across a limited set of services and user journeys.

Introduction and background

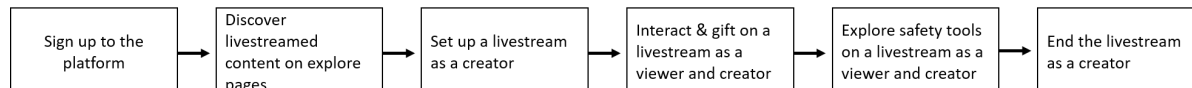
This research was undertaken to support the development of regulatory codes of practice under the UK Online Safety Act (OSA), specifically our June 2025 [Additional Safety Measures Consultation](#).

Livestreaming is a risky functionality according to [Ofcom Risk Profiles](#), with substantial evidence of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) risks. The [UK government recently announced](#) restrictions for under-16s accessing risky functions on services such as gaming, including communicating with strangers and creating livestreams. Additionally, auto play and personalised feeds will be restricted by default for 16–17-year-olds. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of safety-by-design issues around discovery, interaction, reporting and monetisation of content online which is relevant to these restrictions and wider policy.

This project is part of a programme of Behavioural Audits¹ within Ofcom, generating evidence to aid Ofcom in shaping its Online Safety codes and guidance. To date, behavioural audits have explored [Online Services](#) sign-up, features and functionalities affecting time spent online, negative sentiment tools and reporting; and [advertising functionalities](#) to understand risks associated with fraudulent advertising.

This audit of livestreaming services was informed by a taxonomy of Online Choice Architecture (OCA),² which refers to the design of digital environments that shapes how users make decisions and interact with online services and updated to reflect the livestreaming environment. The audit broadly followed this journey map – through the experience of users watching and creating livestreams of different ages.

Figure 1: Researcher journey map



¹ Details of the methodology used can be found in our [methodology paper](#)

² Definitions from the taxonomy and livestreaming features / functionalities are provided in the Annex

Results

Signing up to livestreaming services

Sign-up flows were designed for speed and encouraged rapid completion

On all services, sign-up was encouraged with salient sign-up buttons or prompts. On some services, sign-up was required to access content.

On most services, users accepted terms through click-wrap agreements where they were required to ‘accept’ without reviewing the terms of service. Terms of service typically include information on appropriate behaviour and are important for learning about safety tools. Services offered quicker sign-in options via existing accounts on other services.

This low friction design may prioritise momentum and completion. The sign-up process may present agreement and disclosure as routine steps rather than deliberate decisions.

Age-based protections depended on users being honest about their age at sign-up

On all services included in the audit, age was self-declared at sign-up, and there were no requirements for users to prove their age using highly effective age assurance.³ Some services provided an explanation of why users must declare their age⁴ but there were unclear repercussions around the consequences of misreporting age. Previous Ofcom research suggests the lack of highly effective age assurance during sign-up allows children to access livestreaming functionalities that the service considers inappropriate for their age.⁵

Two services in the audit provided information about how under-18 accounts were different from adult accounts. This information was provided only after users had signed up and self-declared that they were under-16.

The apparent lack of a highly effective age check at sign-up made it quicker to set up an account than if a user had to prove their age. Self-declaration may also increase the likelihood that users provide false information and misreport their age.⁶ Where the consequences of giving a false age

Figure 2: Stylised image of click-wrap agreement in sign-up process

The image shows a stylized sign-up interface. At the top, it says 'Join Today'. Below that, a paragraph states: 'By clicking Sign Up, you are agreeing to our [Terms of Service](#) and acknowledge our [Privacy Notice](#) and [Cookie Policy](#).' Below this text is a rounded rectangular box containing the sign-up fields. It starts with 'Sign up' and 'Email address' followed by an input field with a placeholder 'Enter your email'. Below the input field is a black button labeled 'Sign up'. Underneath the button is the text '----- or -----' and then another input field labeled 'Continue with linked account'. At the bottom of the box, it says 'Already have an account? [Log in](#)'.

Figure 3: Stylised image of sign-up process

The image shows a stylized sign-up process form. At the top, it says 'Please enter your date of birth' with a question mark icon. Below this, a paragraph states: 'Use your own date of birth, even if account is for a business or pet.' Below the paragraph is an input field containing the text '5 May 1985'. Below the input field is a link that says 'Learn More about why we ask for your date of birth'. Below the link is a black button labeled 'Next'. At the bottom of the form, there are three links: 'Help', 'Privacy', and 'Terms'.

³ There is no requirement in the Act to set a minimum age limit or use highly effective age assurance to enforce any minimum age limit services choose to set. We understand certain services use age inference models or another method to analyse a user’s activity while on a service to infer their age, in practice, this means that a user may have limited awareness and visibility of these age checks compared to on sites where a user is prompted to undergo an age check (e.g. facial age estimation) prior to accessing the site or specific parts of it.

⁴ In these explanations, services stated that age was required to make sure users met requirements for certain services, features, or ads. The specific age requirements for these features were not stated.

⁵ Ofcom’s qualitative research into children livestreaming shows that children below the minimum age to livestream on services were still able to livestream regularly by joining friends’ livestreams as guest, using parents accounts, or entering a false date of birth. (Ofcom, 2026, [Livestreaming: The perspective of children and young people who create livestreams](#))

⁶ Ofcom, 2024, [A third of children have false social media age of 18](#)

were unclear, users may be more inclined to take this risk as the benefits of gaining access were immediate, while potential future consequences were distant, uncertain and unclear.

Discovering livestreamed content on services

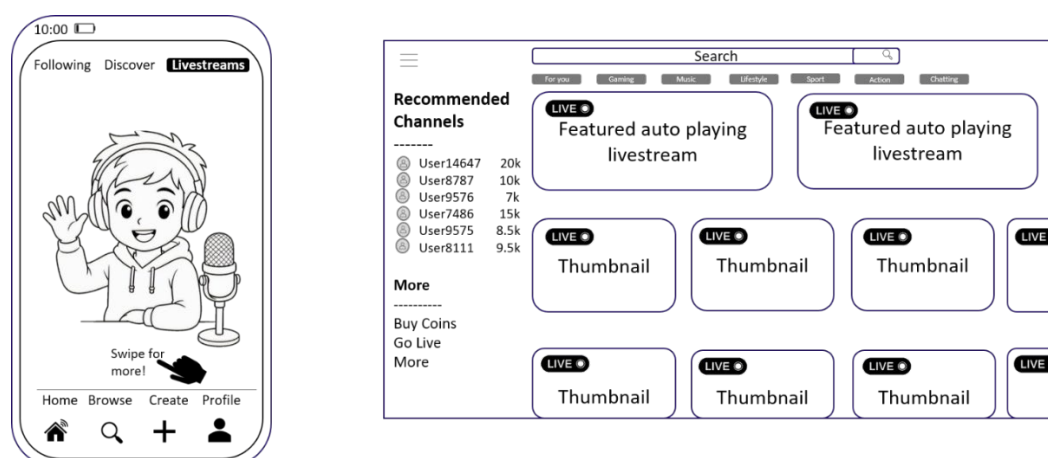
Content played automatically for users and services guided them towards livestreams

On all services, landing pages drove content discovery through autoplay and infinite scroll. Content typically auto played on landing pages and in dedicated Live sections (except for on one service where content did not autoplay in the Live section). Within these, infinite scroll allowed for uninterrupted browsing and seemingly infinite choice, potentially leading to choice overload for users.

On two services, users needed to have some account or search history before the landing pages were populated. Once populated, the same choice architecture features were present that could draw user attention. Landing pages on desktop displayed multiple thumbnails at once, and all services had personalised content typically labelled as 'Recommended' or 'For You'.

Livestreamed content was made noticeable through red or pink 'Live' indicators on thumbnails or profile pictures. One service used additional visual cues including animated profile pictures and flashing text on livestreamed content.

Figure 4: Stylised version of landing pages populated with content



These design features exposed users to content before they had made active choices on how to interact with the service and other users. This might mean people watch service-curated content first, potentially reducing users' ability to actively shape their content experience.

Some services offered extra protections for younger users watching livestreams

On some services we observed extra protections for under-16s encountering livestreams in two ways. First, under-16 accounts did not have a specific 'Live' section like over-16 accounts did; this is likely to reduce the likelihood of encountering livestreams altogether. Second, content labelling was used on restricted content and there were prompts that blocked entry to specific livestreams for under-18s. These safeguards may lower the likelihood of unintended engagement and exposure to harms associated with livestreaming for children's accounts; but they depend on children providing

their correct age at sign up.⁷ In some instances, the presentation of these safeguards might act as a lure for younger users. On two services, restricted livestreams still appeared in landing pages.

On one service, the restricted livestream auto played and was blocked only after the user attempted to click on the stream to watch it in full. If risky or restricted features are surfaced before users are blocked from accessing them in full, the design may still make engagement appear more accessible or inviting. This could lead to children attempting to change their age on the service to access these features.

Creators setting up livestreams⁸

Set-up was designed to encourage fast progression

Users were required to meet specific eligibility requirements such as having a minimum number of followers, verifying their email address and phone numbers, and meeting age requirements before going live. One service required users to request livestreaming access 24 hours in advance. However, once those requirements were met, the process to set up a livestream was easy. 'Next' buttons during the set-up process were typically very salient and the minimum number of clicks to go live ranged from one to seven, including going live via external software. Moderation tools, where available, could quickly be passed over.

This design nudged creators to move quickly through set-up, potentially limiting reflection on safety, moderation, and preparedness for risks that may emerge while live.

Figure 5: Stylised version of set-up process

The figure illustrates a three-step process for setting up a livestream. Each step is shown in a separate window with a title bar and three dots in the top-left corner.

- Stream details:** Contains input fields for 'Title:', 'Description:', and 'Category:' (with a dropdown arrow). A 'Next>>' button is at the bottom right.
- Stream Customisation:** Contains three expandable sections: 'Chat settings', 'Viewer controls', and 'Gifting'. Below these is a 'Slow mode' option with a radio button. A 'Next>>' button is at the bottom right.
- Stream Visibility:** Contains three radio button options: 'Public' (selected), 'Private', and 'Unlisted'. A 'Go Live' button is at the bottom right.

User interactions and gifting on livestreams

Social feedback and gifting are core to the livestreaming experience

Across all services, social feedback features such as the live chat, reactions/likes, and gifting (for eligible creators) were immediately visible on the live display and, on most services, participation was gamified through leaderboards which ranked top viewers based on engagement.⁹ On three services, researcher accounts watching livestreams were prompted via live chat messages or pop-ups inviting them to co-stream with creators.

When our researcher accounts were creators, they typically received notifications about new followers, likes, and reactions and, on two services, services also prompted our researchers to invite

⁷ Ofcom, 2025, [Consultation: Online Safety - Additional Safety Measures](#)

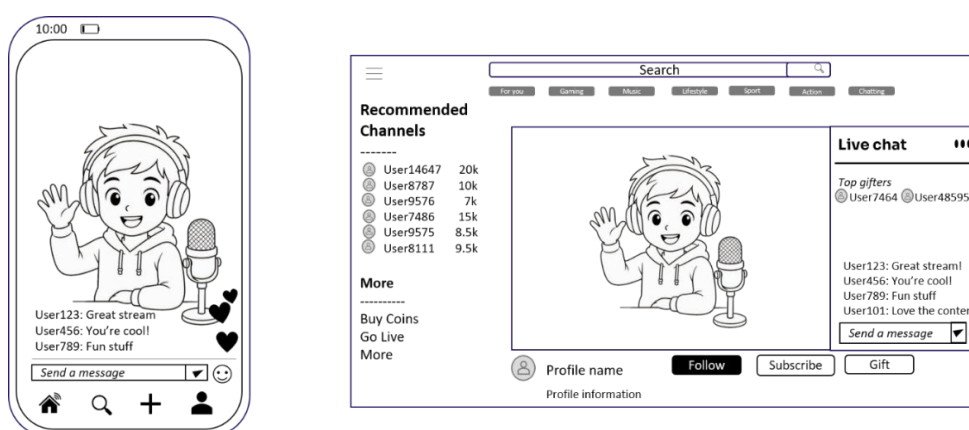
⁸ This was only explored on three services, more details are in the [methodology paper](#).

⁹ Ofcom's quantitative research into children livestreaming shows 72% of children who said they had watched a livestream when it was live, reported that they had undertaken one interactive activity (Ofcom, 2026, [Children who create and view livestreams](#))

those watching to co-stream. One service also provided a dedicated ‘Activity feed’ while live that displayed updates on engagement such as followers, subscribers, and monetary rewards.

People watching and creating livestreams were encouraged to use gifting. Those watching saw highly salient gifting features like buttons and prompts in the chat, with positive messaging about ‘supporting’ and ‘celebrating’. On two services, gifting required the purchase of intermediate currencies, which can create psychological distance between purchase and spend, and could blur perceptions of value and actual financial cost. On two services, creators were shown explicit prompts to monetise their account and their livestreams (one stating ‘It only takes a minute’).

Figure 6: Stylised version of the live display for those watching



This presentation of social feedback could make the livestream environment more of a shared interactive experience rather than a one-way broadcast. This could incentivise longer streams and behaviours that are more likely to elicit engagement from those watching.¹⁰ Frequent prompts to gift and spend money on services may normalise spending as an expected part of watching and creating livestreams rather than an optional or secondary feature.

Age-based restrictions for gifting were weak

Some services had age-based restrictions for gifting, but these were not enforced on our accounts or were easy to bypass. On one service, under-18s appear able to complete a purchase without any friction, even though they were prohibited under the terms of service. On another service although under-18s were unable to purchase and gift, quick-access gift buttons appeared beside comment and reaction buttons, making spending features visible to younger users and potentially more salient, potentially encouraging children to bypass restrictions. These safeguards appeared to create limited friction, rather than reliably preventing access. This may increase the likelihood of attempts to go against terms of service.

Access and use of safety tools

Safety tools were available, but not consistently designed for use in the fast-paced live environment

Users watching and creating livestreams have safety tools, such as reporting and blocking other users. However, these were typically not immediately visible but hidden behind menus (including

¹⁰ Ofcom’s quantitative research into children livestreaming shows children describe watching livestreams as distinct because of real-time interaction which could make watching feel more engaging and social (Ofcom, 2026, [Children who create and view livestreams](#)).

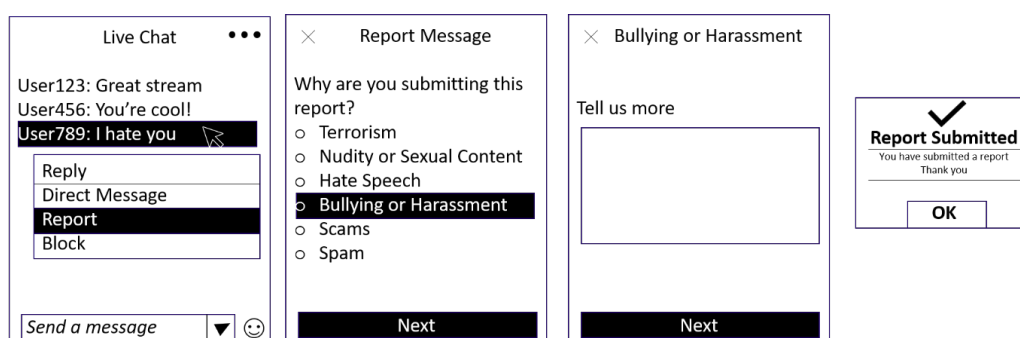
icons, three-dot or kebab menus). One service had a report button immediately visible on their mobile app.

The lack of visibility may direct user attention towards the immediately visible interaction features such as gifting buttons, which could reduce the likelihood of safety actions and mean it is easier for a user to exit the stream or service than report harms. Consequently, services may not be made aware of harmful experiences on livestreams, despite user reporting being a key mechanism for identifying harmful content and informing safety interventions. Barriers to reporting may limit opportunities for services to improve safety.

Blocking and reporting

On all services, while blocking users could often be done in two or three steps, the journey to submit a report had multiple steps and, in some cases, took users away from the live display. This is likely to increase the potential for users to choose the easier option of abandoning the reporting process due to effort of completing a report, rather than being distracted from engagement in the live environment.¹¹

Figure 7: Stylised version of reporting process



Moderation tools for creators

Moderation tools for the creator including auto-moderation of the chat, setting banned words and removing viewers were available across services. However, such tools were typically presented as options behind icons in separate dashboards and not immediately available on the live display. Only one service had an emergency moderation tool immediately visible to the creator.

The difficulty accessing these moderation tools could mean that creators might not realise the tools they can use to protect themselves.¹² This could mean they don't consider livestreaming as a risky activity requiring moderation, perhaps because of optimism bias, and greater awareness of risks could change their decisions. If a creator experiences harm when livestreaming, they might not realise they can change their settings and stop the same thing happening again. Additionally, if creators are unaware of moderation tools, they may be less able to use them, which may mean services are not informed about various risks and harms.

¹¹ Ofcom's qualitative research into children livestreaming shows some 'viewers' felt that reporting negative comments interrupted the viewing experience and sense of real-time connection with the creator. (Ofcom 2026, [Livestreaming: The perspective of children and young people who view livestreams](#))

¹² Ofcom's qualitative research into children livestreaming shows that some 'creators' who had encountered negative experiences described instances of not engaging with safeguards either because they did not want to (to avoid losing attention and followers) or because they felt uncertain due to a lack of knowledge or belief that safeguarding measures would have a big impact. (Ofcom 2026, [Livestreaming: The perspective of children and young people who create livestreams](#)).

Defaults normalised low safety

On two services, creators' moderation tools were defaulted to the least restrictive option (researchers were unable to verify this for the other two services). Across all services where researchers explored the initial set-up process, the default visibility setting when creating a livestream was the most public option.¹³ One service did not offer explicit visibility settings, but instead allowed creators to restrict chat access, with the default set so that anyone could comment. During set up, moderation tools were typically presented on screen, but creators were not required or prompted to engage with them.

Given users tend to stick with default settings, tools that require opt-in are likely to be used by fewer users. Defaulting to low or minimal moderation and presenting moderation tools as optional during set-up may signal that stronger safety measures are unnecessary or less important. As a result, users may be less likely to proactively adjust settings, increasing the likelihood that harmful content remains visible during livestreams.

Defaults for safety and moderation tools available to creators were typically the same regardless of the creator's age. On one service, creators under 18 could choose from a more limited set of livestream content tags.

Safety cues were limited, frontloaded, and easy to miss

During sign-up to services, safety prompts were largely absent, and safety information was only available on separate pages so users would only see this if they chose to follow the links. This friction reduces the prominence of safety information, making users less likely to engage with, recall, or apply available protections when risks arise.

When users start watching livestreams, they see prompts including welcome messages and reminders about community guidelines, but no further safety guidance was provided. One service displayed a safety message about sharing personal information when private messaging. These prompts were typically shown as the user started watching the livestream and disappeared during the livestream. This may reduce their effectiveness should harms arise later.

For creators, there were almost no safety prompts and tutorials with only one service showing dedicated guidance for moderators and safety notices for creators. This could leave creators having to identify and manage risk on their own while also conducting the livestream, making delayed action or inaction more likely.

Creators ending their livestreams

Inconsistencies across services when ending the livestream

On two services, there were prominent buttons to quickly end the livestream. When the user clicked the icon, they were shown a neutral message confirming they wanted to end the livestream; clicking that ended the livestream. On the other service, the end-live icon was small and faint coloured, making it hard to locate. When the user clicked the icon, they were shown a message explicitly encouraging them to continue streaming. They had to click once more to end the livestream

¹³ Although livestreams defaulted to a public audience, Ofcom's quantitative research into children livestreaming shows 69% of children said they streamed to 'people I know' indicating defaults may be changed or children's livestreams do not have a wide reach beyond friends and family. (Ofcom, 2026, [Children who create and view livestreams](#)).

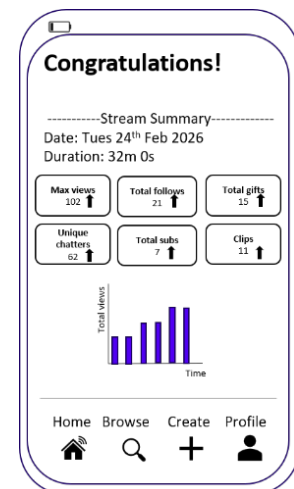
Making it easy for creators to end livestreams can increase user confidence and control. However, where platforms use additional prompts that explicitly encourage continued streaming, users may feel pressure to continue streaming after they would like to stop.

Performance summaries gamify the live experience

All services explored from the creator experience provided post-stream performance summaries and statistics covering views, followers, likes etc. Some services showed creators' progress towards monetisation eligibility which was framed as a goal that the creator could achieve and potential money they could earn.

This gamification and reinforcement of streaming as a goal-driven activity, is likely to increase pressure to stay live and make ending the stream feel like a loss of momentum. As a result, these goals could compete with safety or wellbeing considerations.

Figure 8: Stylised image of end-stream summaries



Conclusion

This audit indicates that the design of livestreaming services can materially shape how users encounter, participate in and manage risks in live environments.

For users watching, auto playing content, personalised recommendations, salient live indicators and immediately visible interaction and gifting tools can increase exposure to livestreamed content and encourage rapid participation. This means those watching may encounter potentially risky content or interactions before they have made active choices about whether, how, or with whom to engage. By contrast, safety information and reporting routes are often less visible or more effortful to use, meaning that they're less likely to use the safety tools available. Services need to know which of their users are children to target them with age-based safety measures. Reliance on self-declaration rather than highly effective age assurance at sign up increases the risk that children may be exposed to harm.

For creators, low-friction set-up, public-by-default visibility, limited safety prompts and gamified feedback can encourage users to go live quickly and stay live for longer. Because users often stick with default settings, safeguards that require creators to actively change default settings may be less likely to be used, particularly where default configurations provide limited protection. Hard-to-find moderation or exit tools, and prompts that encourage continued streaming, may also make it harder for creators to respond effectively to risks as they arise.

Taken together, the findings indicate that effective livestreaming safety depends not only on whether tools exist, but on when and how they are presented within the live experience. Protections are likely to be more effective where they are embedded into defaults, made visible at the point of risk, and designed to support timely action by users.

Annex: Key terms

Table 1: Online Choice Architecture features referenced in Key Findings with definitions

Choice Structure	
Feature	Definition
Defaults	Predefined settings that the user must take active steps to change.
Click-wrap agreements	User agreements where users must “agree” or “accept” only a brief summary of a full document.
Friction / low friction	Barriers that can be used to slow down actions and decision-making processes as well as task progression. Sometimes friction is removed to speed up progress towards a goal.
Autoplay	Content playing without initiation from the user.
Infinite scroll	Feeds that load automatically without any end point and without requiring users to reload.
Choice overload	Occurs when users face too many or too-similar options, making it harder to compare choices and decide.
Recommendations / personalisation	Algorithmically generated suggestions provided by a service to guide users in selecting pages to follow, friends to add, or content to engage with. These recommendations can be personalised using data.
Sensory manipulation	Attention grabbing design elements (visual, audio and tactile) that steer users toward the service or toward particular choices, before users have made an active choice to engage.
Content labelling	Information about content e.g. warnings or tagging/categorising.
Lures	Bringing attention to an attractive object, including stickers, trophies and leaderboards, just as the player is trying to make a decision.
Rankings	Ordering of options in a particular way to serve the provider.
Hidden options	Choices or settings that are less visible compared with other options, or even obscured.
Click fatigue	Repeated clicks or confirmations that make a task feel effortful and encourage abandonment or easy choices.
Salient	The extent to which a feature, option, or piece of information is made prominent and attention-grabbing, increasing the likelihood that users notice it and act on it.
Choice Information	
Unclear repercussions	An insufficient explanation of the outcomes of specific user actions or behaviours.
Intervention prompts	Notifications or messages that encourage users to pause, reflect and consider different behaviours or choices before taking an action.
Intermediate currencies	Service currency obscures the real-world cost of items or actions.
Choice Pressure	
Social feedback	Features that indicate approval or provide validation from others on your actions, influencing how you feel seen, valued, or judged.
Social norm	Perceptions of what others do and what others expect them to do, which influence their behaviour
Gamification	Game-like elements encourage, reward or reinforce user behaviour.
Prompts	Timely cues designed to trigger or reinforce a specific behaviour. They work by making certain choices more top of mind at key moments.
Reinforcement	Rewards or repeated feedback strengthen behaviours and encourage users to continue or return.

Table 2: Definition of livestreaming functionalities

Feature / function	Definition
Live chat	The live text-based communication area where viewers send messages, reactions and questions during the livestream.
Following / subscribing	A paid or free (platform-granted) action allowing viewers to support a creator, often unlocking perks like badges, emotes, or ad-free viewing.
Gifts / gifting	Virtual items purchased by viewers and sent to creators during a livestream, sometimes converting to monetary income for the creator.
Interaction features	Used as an umbrella term encompassing functionalities that enable real-time feedback between users during a livestream. Examples include the live chat, reactions and likes, direct messaging, and polls.
Co-stream	Shared or collaborative livestreams where two or more ‘creators’ appear together, side-by-side, often through split screen. This can be done by multiple creators hosting the livestream together or appearing as guests on another user's stream. The term is used here as an umbrella term encompassing features such as gifting, co-live, and co-hosting.