

# D2C telehealth companies are the latest to erode privacy

Article

**The news:** A joint investigation by **STAT** and **The Markup** organization found 49 of 50 direct-to-consumer (D2C) virtual care websites, from **Cerebral** to **Workit**, were sending consumers' sensitive medical information to big tech and social media platforms.

- 13 of the 50 had at least one tracker that collected patients' answers to medical intake questions, including trackers for **Meta**, **Google**, **TikTok**, **Bin**, **Snap**, **Twitter**, **LinkedIn**, and

## **Pinterest.**

- 25 sites had trackers that told at least one big tech platform if users added an item like a prescription medication to their cart or checked out a subscription for a treatment plan. Those sites included D2C telehealth leaders **Hims & Hers, Ro, and Thirty Madison**.
- Other shared data included URLs of sites the users visited, personal contact information, and when users created accounts.
- **Amazon Clinic**, a text-based telehealth service just launched in November, was the only site that did not show any trackers, the researchers said.

**How they got here:** In June 2022, STAT and The Markup jointly published findings from their investigation of data-sharing practices among the top 100 US hospitals. One-third of those studied were sending sensitive patient data to Facebook through its [Meta pixel](#), the computer code that Facebook offers to websites to allow them to track visitors.

- Details about medical conditions, prescriptions, and doctors' appointments were sent to Facebook.
- Data was collected and sent whenever a person clicked a button to schedule an appointment.
- The report found the **Meta pixel was installed inside the password-protected patient portals** of seven health systems.
- **One result:** Meta now faces [several large class-action suits](#) over the June report.

**HIPAA's no help:** The Healthcare Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) doesn't address the magnitude of technology changes that have taken place since its enactment. And [consumers are confused](#) about what it protects and what it doesn't.

- Most telehealth companies don't provide care themselves. Their websites serve to connect patients with healthcare providers in employed or contracted medical groups.
- "HIPAA-compliant" statements about patient privacy on D2C websites may encourage users to share more information, but their data is still shared with third parties.
- The Federal Trade Commission oversees HIPAA violations and has brought cases previously for **deceptive use of HIPAA-compliant badges** on some sites.

**This will backfire, eventually:** Consumer trust is at stake for *all* digital health companies, not just D2C telehealth startups.

Digital trust is the confidence people have that a platform or company will protect their information and provide a safe environment for them. Once it's lost by one group of healthcare providers, suspicion could taint all patient interactions going forward.

A just-published survey from **Trusted Future** found half of respondents (49%) used apps for fitness or wellbeing, or stored health-related data on their mobile devices from doctors, hospitals, or insurance companies (45%).

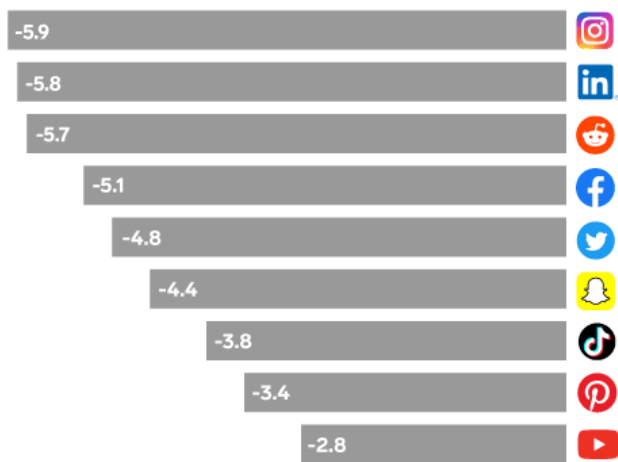
But there was no doubt about their sentiments on privacy and security **around their personal health data.**

- **82% are concerned their private data could be sold** without their consent
- **82% are concerned it could be shared** with others without their permission
- And **81% are concerned it could be lost or stolen** and show up in public somehow.

**Go deeper:** Our sixth annual [\*Digital Trust Benchmark 2022\*](#) shows how losing consumers' trust is affecting nine major social media platforms. With the latest STAT/Markup report, digital health startups could see similar sentiments rising in 2023.

### Trust in Social Platforms Is Declining, 2022

change in total benchmark score vs. 2021



Note: a social platform's total score is calculated from the weighted scores for each of the five pillars in the benchmark (Security, Community, Legitimacy, Ad Experience, Ad Relevance); in 2022, platform total scores ranged from 66.5 to 83.9 out of 175 total possible points

Source: Insider Intelligence, "US Digital Trust Benchmark 2022," Sep 2022

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