

Negative Social Impacts of Social Media

A Comprehensive Review

Academic Research Report

Executive Summary

Social media platforms have achieved unprecedented global reach, connecting over 5.17 billion users worldwide and fundamentally transforming how societies communicate, share information, and interact. While these platforms offer opportunities for connection and information dissemination, research increasingly documents significant negative social consequences that warrant careful consideration. This report examines the primary social harms associated with social media use, including harassment and abuse, mental health deterioration, addiction and compulsive use, body image concerns and eating disorders, misinformation and disinformation, privacy violations and data exploitation, and issues of accessibility and inequality.

1. Harassment and Abuse in Social Media Environments

1.1 Prevalence and Severity

Social media platforms have become primary venues for harassment and abuse, with toxic behavior affecting users across all demographic groups. Research indicates that online harassment is alarmingly common and escalating.

A 2024 survey found that 41% of Americans have experienced online harassment at some point, with 75% of these incidents occurring on social media platforms [1]. The situation has worsened significantly, with online hate and harassment surging twelve percentage points from 40% in 2022 to 52% in 2023 for adults [2]. Among teenagers aged 13–17, approximately 50% experienced some form of online harassment in the past twelve months [3].

The 2024 Anti-Defamation League report found that severe harassment increased substantially, with 22% of Americans experiencing severe harassment on social media in the past 12 months, up from 18% in 2023. This includes an increase in physical threats from 7% to 10% [3].

1.2 Forms of Harassment

Research has documented multiple forms of harassment across social media platforms, including name-calling (the most common type at 37%), purposeful embarrassment, physical threats, sustained harassment, sexual harassment, stalking, and the posting of explicit images without consent [1][4].

According to cyberbullying research, lifetime victimization of online harassment rose from 33.6% in 2016 to 58.2% in 2025, while offending behaviors jumped from 5–6% between 2015 and 2021 to 16.1% in 2025 [5].

1.3 Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Groups

Harassment disproportionately affects women, minorities, and marginalized communities. Research demonstrates that 60% of teen girls and 59% of teen boys have been targets of online harassment [6]. Notably, girls experience sexual harassment and grooming behaviors more frequently than boys [4].

The 2024 ADL report found that people with disabilities were more likely to be harassed than non-disabled people, with 45% experiencing any harassment compared to 36% for non-disabled individuals, and 31% experiencing severe harassment versus 19% [3]. Transgender respondents experienced a surge in online harassment, with 63% reporting harassment in 2024, up from 51% in 2023, including a 15-point increase in severe harassment [3].

Research also found that 20% of Americans who have been harassed online believe they were targeted because of their political views, a notable increase from 14% three years prior [1].

1.4 Platform-Specific Issues

Among social networks, research indicates that children on YouTube are most likely to be cyberbullied at 79%, followed by Snapchat at 69%, TikTok at 64%, and Facebook at 49% [7]. Facebook and Instagram remain the platforms where the most harassment occurs among teenagers, with 61% of harassed teens experiencing harassment on Facebook and 39% on Instagram [3].

Studies show that between 16% and 58% of women globally have experienced technology-facilitated violence, with sexual harassment and stalking being the most commonly reported forms [8]. In Arab States, 60% of women internet users have experienced online violence [8].

2. Psychological and Emotional Consequences

2.1 Depression and Anxiety

A growing body of research establishes significant links between social media use and deteriorating mental health, particularly depression and anxiety among adolescents and young adults.

A systematic review found that the use of social networking sites is associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress [9]. New York City has taken the unprecedented step of classifying social networking sites as a public health threat [10].

Research from MIT found that college-wide access to Facebook led to an increase in severe depression by 7% and anxiety disorder by 20%, with effects appearing to grow stronger as people are exposed to Facebook for greater lengths of time [11]. The negative effect on mental health was roughly 20% the magnitude of what is experienced by those who lose their job [11].

Survey respondents using between 7 and 11 different social media platforms had 3 times greater odds of having high levels of depressive symptoms and 3.2 times greater odds of having high levels of anxiety symptoms compared to those using only 2 or fewer platforms [12].

2.2 Causal Relationships and Experimental Evidence

A randomized controlled trial published in 2024 found that limiting social media use to one hour per day over three weeks resulted in decreased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fear of missing out, alongside improved sleep quality among young adults experiencing emotional distress [13]. This provides strong evidence that reducing social media usage can causally improve mental health outcomes.

Another study found that high frequency of posting on social media was associated with increased mental health problems a year later, though viewing social media content showed no similar association [14].

2.3 Youth Mental Health Crisis

The prevalence of major depressive episodes among adolescents increased from 8.7% in 2005 to 11.3% in 2014, with new media screen activities suggested as one of the causes [10]. The suicide rate among 10- to 24-year-olds was stable from 2000 to 2007 but then increased 57% between 2007 and 2017 [11].

Research indicates that teens who use social media are at least three times more likely to have a diagnosis of depression or anxiety than those who do not [15]. Among U.S. teens, 70% of those who use social media for over five hours daily are significantly more likely to contemplate suicide [16].

Teens who use social media in part from boredom are more likely to have indicators of depression (28%) compared with teens who do not use social media when bored (8%), with a difference of 20% between the two groups [15].

2.4 Self-Esteem and Social Comparison

Research suggests that people who spend significant time on social media tend to have lower self-esteem, which makes them more vulnerable to anxiety and depression [17]. Constant exposure to the seemingly ideal lives of others on social media leads to feelings of inadequacy and personal devaluation associated with decreased self-esteem [17].

A study found that 60% of social media users reported that it impacted their self-esteem in a negative way [18]. Research demonstrates that social media addiction negatively impacts body esteem through the mediating role of physical appearance perfectionism and concerns about imperfection [19].

3. Social Isolation and Reduced Face-to-Face Interaction

3.1 Displacement of Real-World Social Connection

While social media promises to enhance connectivity, research suggests it may paradoxically contribute to social isolation by displacing meaningful in-person interactions.

According to social displacement theory, people who spend more time in sedentary behaviors such as social media use have less time for face-to-face social interaction, which has been proven to be protective against mental disorders [9]. Among American adults, 67% connect social media usage to feelings of social isolation [16].

High usage of platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram can increase feelings of loneliness and isolation, while reducing social media usage can make individuals feel less lonely and isolated and improve overall well-being [20].

3.2 Quality vs. Quantity of Social Interaction

Research demonstrates that engagement in social media by socially isolated users with low self-esteem can result in negative effects on their well-being, with high levels of involvement negatively affecting well-being through mechanisms involving depression [21].

Some scholars propose that virtual engagement is a diluted and dysfunctional social interaction that negatively affects participants by supplanting richer in-person involvement [12]. The increasing use of social media for social interaction could alter traditional forms of communication, with concerns including a potential decline in face-to-face interactions leading to social isolation or a reduction in essential interpersonal skills [12].

4. Addiction and Compulsive Use

4.1 Neurobiological Mechanisms

Social media addiction is a behavioral addiction characterized by an uncontrollable urge to use social media platforms, often leading to excessive time spent that interferes with important life activities and responsibilities [22].

Social media platforms produce the same neural circuitry caused by gambling and recreational drugs. Studies show that the constant stream of retweets, likes, and shares from these sites cause the brain's reward area to trigger the same kind of chemical reaction seen with drugs like cocaine [23]. Some neuroscientists have compared social media interaction to a syringe of dopamine being injected straight into the system [23].

Adolescents are often victims of an unrelenting dopamine cycle created in a loop of desire induced by endless social media feeds, seeking and anticipating rewards in the way of photo tagging, likes, and comments [24]. Research from 2024–2025 shows that this dopamine loop contributes to dopamine deficit states, where baseline dopamine drops, making everyday activities less rewarding and driving compulsive use [25].

4.2 Prevalence and Demographics

As of 2024, approximately 4.8 billion people worldwide utilize social media platforms, and an estimated 210 million individuals — roughly 4–5% — suffer from social media addiction [26]. The issue is particularly pronounced among youth, with 54% of teenagers acknowledging that it is hard

to give up social media [26].

In the United States, about 30% of social media users self-identify as addicts, and this figure rises to 78% for individuals aged 18–24 [26]. On average, Americans spend 2 hours and 24 minutes daily on social media [26].

The average smartphone user checks their device 58 times per day, with each check potentially reinforcing dopamine-driven behavior patterns [18]. A 2024 study revealed that the average user makes 300 distinct scrolling actions per day, with each action potentially triggering a dopamine response [18].

4.3 Design Features That Foster Addiction

Social media platforms use frequent updates, notifications, and endless scrolling feeds that distract users, shift focus from essential tasks, and create a state of partial attention [24]. Advanced machine learning algorithms analyze user behavior to interpret sentiments and interests, creating increasingly personalized addiction cycles [24].

Social platforms exploit what psychologists call intermittent reinforcement — the same principle that makes slot machines so addictive — and completion bias through infinite scroll features and autoplay videos [18]. Modern social media interfaces employ friction-removal design, eliminating natural stopping points and creating what researchers term a digital slot machine effect [18].

4.4 Psychological and Social Consequences

Approximately 40% of users report feeling anxious without access to their social media profiles [26]. Among U.S. teens, a striking 70% of those who use social media for over five hours daily report feeling anxious when disconnected [26].

Behavioral changes due to social media addiction are significant, with 64% of users reporting feelings of stress or anxiety after logging off [26]. Many users express returning to social media in search of comfort or validation, creating a cycle of dependence.

5. Body Image and Eating Disorders

5.1 Prevalence and Scope

Social media usage has been consistently linked to body image concerns and eating disorder pathology among young people, particularly adolescents and young adults.

Internal research conducted for Meta demonstrated an association between social media use and body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls. Specifically, 32% of adolescent girls surveyed indicated that Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies, particularly if they were already experiencing negative body image [27].

Research found that almost 50% of girls reported that they worry often or always about their bodies, whereas only a quarter of boys surveyed felt similarly [28]. In a Norwegian study, 80% of girls reported that social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, had a negative influence on their self-perception of appearance [29].

5.2 Mechanisms and Mediating Factors

The overarching relationship between social media use, body image and eating disorders operates through several mechanisms, including social comparison, internalization of appearance ideals, and exposure to curated idealized images [30].

A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis found that the weighted average correlation between higher online social comparison and greater body image concerns was significant ($r = .454$), as was the correlation between higher social comparison and eating disorder symptoms ($r = 0.36$) [31].

5.3 Platform-Specific Effects

Studies have shown that appearance-focused social media use obtained a stronger effect size than general social media use, suggesting that image-based platforms like Instagram pose particular risks [33]. Instagram uniquely focuses on image-based content with in-built filters that enhance the appearance of photos, increasing upward appearance-based comparisons and their negative effects on body image [33].

5.4 Association with Eating Disorders

Research demonstrates a significant association between social media use and disordered eating in young adolescents [34]. The promotion of fad diets, weight-loss aids, and the exaltation of extreme thinness aids in the normalization of harmful behaviors [32].

The relationship between problematic Instagram use and eating disorder psychopathology has been established, with problematic use negatively impacting body esteem and increasing eating disorder symptoms [33][36].

6. Misinformation and Disinformation

6.1 Prevalence and Spread

Social media has become a primary vector for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, with serious consequences for public health, democracy, and social cohesion.

Research indicates that approximately 62% of online information could be false [37]. In 2025, 86% of global citizens have been exposed to misinformation, while 40% of content shared on social media is fake [37]. Among Americans, 80% have consumed fake news, and 23% admit to sharing false stories, knowingly or not [37].

A survey found that 38.2% of U.S. news consumers reported having unknowingly shared fake news or misinformation on social media [38]. A 2024 study by Indiana University found that just 0.25% of X users were responsible for between 73% and 78% of all tweets considered low-credibility or misinformation [39].

6.2 Social Media as News Source

Today, 86% of U.S. adults report that they at least partially get their news from digital devices, with 54% of Americans getting at least some of their news from social media [39]. Among 18–29 year olds, social media is the most common news source [39].

6.3 Algorithmic Amplification

Social media algorithms reward users who share content most frequently by broadcasting their posts to a higher number of social feeds, earning them more views, likes, comments and shares. Exciting or infuriating information tends to stoke more reaction, and by nudging frequent users to keep sharing high-performing content, the algorithm ends up fueling networks of ongoing misinformation [39].

Social bots imitate human users on social media and automatically post and reshare content, often relating to controversial topics within politics and health. Bots can operate together in a coordinated manner in a botnet and use tactics to increase their exposure and manipulate users to reshare misinformation [41].

6.4 Impact on Trust and Society

Trust in mainstream news media has plummeted, with only 32% of Americans having a great deal or fair amount of trust in mass media [38]. Research shows that 97% believe that the spread of misinformation and disinformation is harmful to society [38].

Studies show that users with extreme political views are more likely than others to both encounter and believe false news, and that current methods to combat the spread of misinformation are likely not viable because extreme users tend to see misinformation early on [42].

7. Privacy and Data Surveillance

7.1 Data Collection Practices

Social media platforms engage in extensive data collection and surveillance practices, raising serious concerns about user privacy and autonomy.

A 2024 Federal Trade Commission staff report examining major social media and video streaming services found that companies engaged in vast surveillance of consumers in order to monetize their personal information while failing to adequately protect users online, especially children and teens [43].

The report found that companies collected and could indefinitely retain troves of data, including information from data brokers, and about both users and non-users of their platforms. The business models of many companies incentivized mass collection of user data to monetize, especially through targeted advertising, which accounts for most of their revenue [43].

7.2 User Awareness and Concerns

Research shows that 73% of consumers are more concerned about their data privacy now than they were a few years ago [44]. Survey data reveals that 60% of Americans believe it is impossible to go through daily life without having their personal data tracked by businesses and the government [44].

Moving into 2024, public perceptions of social media privacy have not improved, with 77% of Americans having little to no trust in social media leaders to admit mistakes or take responsibility for data misuse publicly. Furthermore, 89% express substantial concern about how social media platforms gather personal information on children [44].

7.3 Types of Data Collected

Social media platforms gather enormous amounts of personal data including user profiles, posts, likes, shares, interactions, status updates, religious beliefs, location data, personal interests, and shared content [45]. Information is also released unknowingly through tracking cookies, which track online activity including webpage views, social media sharing, and purchase history [45].

7.4 Security Risks and Breaches

Social media security breaches can expose user data to cybercriminals who may use it for identity theft, scams, or other illegal activities. There are also concerns around mass surveillance, tracking of sensitive information, and discrimination through user profiling [46].

In 2021, more than 90,000 users were victims of social media fraud, which led to \$770 million in losses according to the Federal Trade Commission [47]. Phishing attacks on social media are common, where users are tricked into disclosing their login credentials or sensitive information [47].

8. Accessibility, Inequality, and Social Stratification

8.1 Digital Divide

Not everyone has equal access to social media technology and the skills to use it effectively, which exacerbates existing inequities in education, employment prospects, and social experiences.

Research indicates that children from households with annual incomes under \$75,000 were twice as likely to be cyberbullied than kids from houses with annual incomes over \$75,000 (22 versus 11 percent) [7]. This suggests that economic disparities translate into differential experiences of harm on social media platforms.

8.2 Cultural and Geographic Variations

Research shows that in collectivist cultures, the prevalence of social media addiction is 31% versus 14% in individualist cultures [26]. This suggests that cultural contexts significantly influence how social media impacts users and communities.

8.3 Language and Content Moderation

Newer risks include poor content moderation in less common languages, making digital spaces more complex to navigate for non-English speakers [5]. This creates an inequality in the safety and quality of experience across different linguistic communities.

9. Corporate Responsibility and Regulatory Gaps

9.1 Platform Accountability

Research demonstrates that social media companies receive low ratings for handling abuse on their platforms. Fully 79% say social media companies are doing an only fair or poor job at addressing online harassment or bullying on their platforms [1].

9.2 Inadequate Safeguards

The FTC staff report found that many companies engaged in broad data sharing that raises serious concerns regarding the adequacy of the companies' data handling and protections. Users and

non-users had little or no way to opt out of how their data was used by automated systems, and there were differing, inconsistent, and inadequate approaches to monitoring and testing the use of automated systems [43].

9.3 Regulatory Responses

Governments around the world are beginning to implement stricter regulations. The European Union's Digital Services Act came into effect throughout 2023–2024, while the EU's GDPR has set a high standard for online privacy [48]. In May 2023, European Union regulators fined Meta \$1.3 billion for violating EU privacy laws [49].

In the United States, multiple lawsuits have alleged illegal data collection practices by Facebook and others under federal and state laws, and new state-level privacy laws are emerging. The City of New York and other jurisdictions have filed lawsuits against TikTok, Meta, Snap, and YouTube to hold companies responsible for fueling the youth mental health crisis [10].

Conclusions and Recommendations

The evidence demonstrates that while social media platforms offer innovative opportunities for connection and information sharing, they also present substantial negative social consequences that require urgent attention. Key areas of concern include:

- Widespread harassment and abuse that disproportionately affects women, minors, people with disabilities, transgender individuals, and marginalized groups, with inadequate platform moderation and safety measures.
- Significant deterioration of mental health including depression and anxiety, particularly among adolescents and young adults, with causal links established through experimental studies.
- Social isolation resulting from displacement of face-to-face interactions and overdependence on virtual environments.
- Addiction and compulsive use driven by dopamine-based reward systems and manipulative design features, affecting approximately 210 million users globally.
- Body image concerns and eating disorders particularly among adolescent girls, driven by social comparison and exposure to idealized images.
- Widespread misinformation and disinformation with approximately 62% of online information potentially false, undermining public trust and democratic discourse.
- Privacy violations and data exploitation through vast surveillance practices with inadequate user protections.
- Digital inequality that exacerbates existing social and economic disparities.

As social media platforms continue to evolve and achieve wider adoption, stakeholders including technology companies, policymakers, researchers, educators, and users must work collaboratively to:

- Develop and enforce robust moderation and safety systems that effectively address harassment and protect vulnerable populations.
- Establish clear legal frameworks for corporate accountability including comprehensive federal privacy legislation and regulations addressing mental health impacts.
- Redesign platform features to reduce addictive qualities and implement data minimisation policies.
- Create evidence-based guidelines for healthy social media use, particularly for children and adolescents.
- Address algorithmic amplification of misinformation and implement transparent content moderation.
- Protect user privacy through comprehensive data protection laws and enforcement.
- Address accessibility barriers and digital inequality.
- Conduct ongoing research into long-term social and psychological impacts.
- Implement comprehensive digital literacy and safety education programmes.

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