

Social Media and Social Controversy:  
Platforms' Responses to Their Critics  
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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## **Social Media and Social Controversy: Platforms' Responses to Their Critics**

The first social media platform, SixDegrees, was created in 1997 and was based on the theory that everyone is connected through no more than six degrees of separation (Lile, 2023). People could create profiles and connect with other users. In the 26 years since its start, social networking site (SNS) usage has grown. Applications such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly known as Twitter), and TikTok are part of people's lives worldwide. Social media is a way to meet like-minded individuals one would not meet otherwise due to distance or lack of opportunities. For many, SNSs are also a way to learn about social issues and spread awareness. Influencers and content creators can earn a living from social media. Facebook is the platform with the most current users, with 3 billion active monthly users. Social media companies have been blamed for eroding the mental health of young users. Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp, has been accused of knowingly harming its users. The responses of social media companies to such criticism have been controversial.

Many parents, teachers, and developmental psychologists have condemned social media companies for their platforms' effects on children's mental health. Some teachers blame social media for unwanted classroom behavior. In public hearings, companies' responsibility for the effects of their platforms has been investigated. The companies have generally resisted acting decisively, limiting their responses to empty promises.

### **Review of Research**

Research on the effects of social media on adolescents has often relied on cross-sectional data rather than longitudinal studies, drawing criticism. Nesi et al. (2021) and Twenge et al.

(2018) used longitudinal methods to examine the impact of social network site (SNS) usage on adolescent and young adult mental health. Nesi et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between depressive symptoms and negative online experiences over a year, especially among girls. Twenge et al. (2018) identified links between frequent screen activities and symptoms of depression and anxiety. While these studies highlight concerns about SNSs, this report will focus on responses to scientific findings and related claims.

Additionally, research by the Pew Research Center on adolescent social media usage is frequently cited. Their 2023 report found that YouTube remains the most popular platform, with 93% of respondents using it (Anderson, Faverio, Gottfried, 2023). More respondents in this study reported that social media had a mostly negative effect on their age group than a positive one.

Another study by Jacqueline Nesi, Sophia Choukas-Bradley, and Mitchell J. Prinstein (2018) explores the impact of social media on youth at a peer level. They identified five key ways social media has changed peer interactions: increased frequency and immediacy of experiences, amplification through greater intensity and scale, qualitative changes in experiences, opportunities for compensatory behaviors, and the creation of new behaviors.

These sources illustrate social media's effects on young people. This report will further explore how social media companies address these criticisms.

## **Parents of Adolescents on Social Media**

The phrase “Mother/father knows best” reflects parents' intuition about their children. Many parents are increasingly worried about social media's effects. At a Wake County Public Schools town hall in North Carolina, grandmother Diana Tingle expressed concern, saying, “It is

a little scary. She seems to be doing fine, but there could be something she's not telling me," about her 17-year-old granddaughter (Wake County et al., 2024). In the same community, a family lost their son to a fentanyl overdose from a pill sold via Snapchat. "It was due to a pill that hit Snapchat. So that's my biggest concern today," said mother Camissa Kerr (Wake County et al., 2024). They believe such illegal drug transactions should not occur on platforms popular with minors.

This issue is widespread, prompting Senator Laphonza Butler (D-CA) to question Snapchat CEO Evan Spiegel about drug access on the platform during a Senate Judiciary Committee session in January 2024. Spiegel apologized, stating, "We work very hard to block all search terms related to drugs and refer detected content to law enforcement" (MSNBC, 2024). However, Senator Butler noted, "None of those efforts are keeping our kids from accessing drugs on your platform." In Los Angeles, over 60 families sued Snapchat in October 2022, with the case proceeding to trial in January 2024 (Kindelan, 2024).

Social media also exposes children to cyberbullying and dangerous challenges. At the same Senate session, many parents shared their loss of children due to social media-related incidents. Rose and Rob Bronstein, who lost their son Nate to cyberbullying, criticized CEOs on Fox 32 Chicago, saying, "Waiting for these companies to police themselves is not serious" (Fox 32 Chicago, 2024). Mrs. Bronstein added, "(Mark Zuckerberg) did not take any accountability for his platform causing these harms to our children" (Fox 32 Chicago, 2024). Parents feel that companies' promises to address these issues lack tangible action.

Social media platforms also host harmful content. The father of a 9-year-old boy who passed in February of 2024 is warning parents to look closer into the content that their children are accessing (Borcia, 2024). His son seemed to be participating in the "blackout challenge" on

TikTok that involved recording choking yourself until one passes out (Borcia, 2024). The platform is aware of this challenge on the app, as in 2022, two families filed to sue TikTok over the deaths of their eight and 9-year-old daughters from participating in the same challenge (Paul, 2022). One complaint on behalf of the child, Lalani Walton, said, “She was also under the belief that if she posted a video of herself doing the Blackout Challenge, then she would become famous, and so she decided to give it a try. Lalani was eight years old at the time and did not appreciate or understand the dangerous nature of what TikTok was encouraging her to do” (Paul, 2022). Spokesperson Mahsau Cullinane made the following comment in 2022. “This disturbing ‘challenge,’ which people seem to learn about from sources other than TikTok, long predates our platform and has never been a TikTok trend. We remain vigilant in our commitment to user safety and would immediately remove related content if found. Our deepest sympathies go out to the family for their tragic loss” (Clark, 2022). Despite this message from TikTok, the challenge is still being viewed on the platform and attempted by children years later.

In November of 2022, 55 families who lost a child due to a social media-related incident accompanied by Fairplay, Parents Together Action, and Eating Disorder Coalition wrote a letter to Congress pleading for action to be taken. The letter encouraged Congress to pass the Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) and the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA). The Senate Commerce Committee passed both in July of 2023. They wrote, “Our children should not be collateral damage in tech companies’ relentless push for profits. Big Tech must be held accountable for the business decisions that are taking our children’s lives” (Anderson et al., 2022). Even with the Senate passing these two bills to protect children further, parents still have to advocate for children against SNS giants as the same problems continue.

## **Medical Professionals on the Effects of Social Media**

American psychologists aim to protect youth by advising on social media's effects. In May 2023, the American Psychological Association issued ten recommendations for stakeholders to address teen social media usage and prevent adverse outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2023). Based on the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, their report noted that social media worsened body image for 40% of adolescents.

Psychologists have identified that not only is harmful content a concern, but habitual and addictive social media use can also be problematic (Griffiths, 2018). A 2016 study defined social media addiction as "being preoccupied with social media (salience), using it to reduce negative feelings (mood modification), and increasing use over time to achieve the same pleasure" (Andreassen, Pallesen, Griffiths, 2016). This study of 23,532 Norwegians aged 16-88 found correlations between social media addiction, narcissism, and low self-esteem. Those diagnosed with narcissism and low self-esteem were more prone to social media addiction (Andreassen, Pallesen, Griffiths, 2017). A similar 2022 study on Greek adults revealed a positive link between psychological distress and social media addiction and a negative link between psychological distress and self-compassion (Mitropoulou, Karagianni, Thomadakis, 2022). Another study found that 24.4% of 1,363 Turkish adolescents were addicted to social media, noting that this addiction, coupled with following influencers, negatively affected their perceptions of social appearance (Caner, Efe, Başdaş, 2022).

Before some of these reports, in 2021, Instagram announced a plan to alert users about the time spent on the app. A press release titled Raising the Standard for Protecting Teens and Supporting Parents Online described the feature. "We'll be taking a stricter approach to what we

recommend to teens on the app. We'll stop people from tagging or mentioning teens that don't follow them, we'll be nudging teens towards different topics if they've been dwelling on one topic for a long time, and we're launching the Take a Break feature in the US, UK, ... which we previously announced" (Mosseri, 2021). In an interview, Senior clinical psychologist Dr. Jamie Howard responded to the new plan, "That could help having some sort of responsibility that we impose on kids that we sort of model for them. Let's take a little break so that you don't get so sucked in, right it's not technically an addiction because it's not a foreign chemical, but it's what we call reinforcing that once you're in, it is so hard to get out yeah not just for kids for adults" (CBS Mornings, 2021). In 2022, TikTok introduced a similar feature, allowing users to set time limits and reminders to take breaks. While the effectiveness of these features in reducing social media addiction is still unknown, TikTok has implemented a reminder for late-night usage, and Instagram plans to add a similar feature.

### **Social Media in American Classrooms**

With most school-age children using social media, its impact on classrooms is significant. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in collaboration with the American Psychological Association, Design It For Us, Fairplay, and Parent Together, highlighted these effects in a report. The report noted that school districts are incurring costs to address mental health issues, property damage, and threats to students and staff due to social media. Additionally, social media has reduced instructional time as schools address student behavior and educate about social media (AFT, 2023). The report called for social media companies to prioritize child safety, protect student privacy, safeguard against risky algorithms, and prevent addictive behaviors. "Social media platforms must prioritize the safety of our children over profits. Companies must

stop resisting common-sense changes needed to protect students” (AFT, 2023). Echoing AFT’s stance, Seattle public schools filed a lawsuit against TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and YouTube for allegedly knowingly recommending harmful content online and exacerbating a mental health crisis. The lawsuit stated, “Defendants' growth is a product of choices they made to design and operate their platforms in ways that exploit the psychology and neurophysiology of their users into spending more and more time on their platforms. These techniques are both particularly effective and harmful to the youth audience Defendants have intentionally cultivated, creating a mental health crisis among America’s youth” (Seattle School District et al., 2023). Social media representatives made statements shortly after the filing about prioritizing their users' well-being and their actions to stop the adverse effects. However, no comments were made directly about the platforms' effects on schools. Since Seattle’s filings, over 200 similar filings have been made by school districts nationwide. The common sentiment is that schools have to bear the responsibility for student issues stemming from social media.

### **Political Pushback on Social Media**

Many politicians advocate for holding social media companies accountable for the dangers posed to youth. In 2023, the U.S. Government took steps to enhance social media safety. The Senate Commerce Committee approved the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) and the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act 2.0 (COPPA 2.0) on July 27, 2023. Additionally, a bipartisan bill proposed banning children under 13 from using social media and requiring guardian consent for minors to create accounts. Senator Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, stated, “The idea that an algorithm has some sort of First Amendment right to get into your kid’s brain is



preposterous” (Jalonick, 2023). Many legislators supporting this legislation are parents concerned about children's online safety.

Since its inception in 2004, Facebook has faced criticism over privacy and objectionable content. After acquiring Instagram in 2012, Meta faced increased scrutiny. In October 2023, 33 states joined a federal lawsuit against Meta, alleging deceptive advertising of the harms of Facebook and Instagram. State attorneys general claim Meta ignored safety concerns to attract young users and increase profits (Allen, 2023). In April 2022, two U.S. senators and two congress members wrote to Mark Zuckerberg, condemning Meta’s promotion of eating disorder content. They demanded that Meta respond to five questions within 30 days, including, “Will Meta commit to stopping the amplification of pro-eating disorder content to children and teens?” (Markey et al., 2022). Meta has not responded to the lawsuit or the letter.

Since its start, TikTok has also received political pushback in the U.S. over similar privacy and sensitive content issues. On March 13, 2024, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 352 to 65 to ban TikTok in the U.S. if the app’s current owner, Beijing-based ByteDance, does not sell in six months. The most publicly shared reason to support the bill is to protect U.S. data from the Chinese government. An FBI Director, Christopher Wray, told the House Intelligence Committee, "Americans need to ask themselves whether they want to give the Chinese government the ability to control access to their data, whether they want to give the Chinese government the ability to control the information they get through the recommendation algorithm," (Yilek, 2024). The CEO of TikTok responded in a video post the evening of the vote, saying, “Over the last few years, we have invested to keep your data safe and our platform free from outside manipulation. We have committed that we will continue to do so” (Yilek, 2024). There is currently debate over whether the bill's purpose is to protect U.S. national security or to

take away a platform that has become a significant factor in social advocacy and spreading information. The bill will now go to the Senate, where commenters believe the result is unclear. This vote and the questioning of social media CEOs by the Senate Judiciary Committee in January 2024 may signal upcoming consequences for companies failing to enhance user protection.

## **Conclusion**

Social media's presence is growing, increasing in popularity and user numbers yearly. Significant changes require more than pressure from various entities to ensure user protection. Despite complaints from parents, healthcare professionals, and the government, fundamental issues with social media platforms remain unaddressed. To genuinely protect users, especially minors, the KOSA and COPPA need to be brought to the Senate floor and passed. Additionally, timelines for adhering to the policies must be created to pressure the completion of deliverables. We have not seen a generation of youth have access to social media for their entire childhood like they do now. It is time to take action before we lose more children to the harms of social media.

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