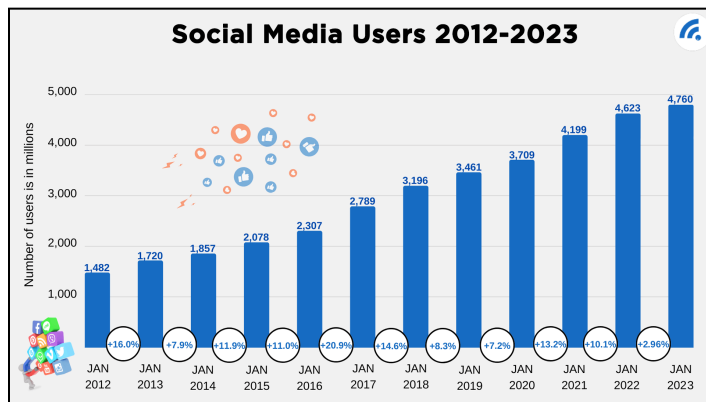


## Introduction

As of July 2023, there are 4.88 billion people in the world who use at least one social media platform. This number makes up about 60.6% of the global population. Around 2004-2006, social media became far more popularized with the introduction of MySpace and Facebook. Those two sites paved the way



for a multi-billion dollar industry that several governments and legislators scramble to regulate.

As no company has a monopoly over all social media platforms, regulating it in the economic sense is extremely difficult. Due to the business model of social media being so different from normal corporations, the usual antitrust laws, or laws that are created in order to ensure that companies compete fairly are completely useless. The two most influential antitrust systems are the United States' antitrust law and the United Kingdom's competition law. Due to the lack of a social media monopoly, every modern antitrust law is completely incapable of regulating the social media industry.

Additionally, the content that social media serves is mostly created by users. When discussing the interactive nature of social media, Jonathan A. Obar and Steve Wildman of the Quello Center at Michigan State University said it "can be characterized as a shift from user as consumer to user as participant." Social media acts merely as a platform for users to create content and discuss topics with each other, which leads to social media being seen as an extension of free speech. Social media companies have two streams of revenue, advertising on

their platforms and gleaning users data to sell it to other companies. Curating a user's "feed" with advertisements they are more likely to relate to or need. Regulation of the two income streams could be interpreted as the government trying to control a platform and thus restricting free speech.

Several reports have been published that directly correlate developing anxiety or depression to frequently using social media. This correlation is most predominantly seen in adolescents, affecting women the most. On top of the mental health epidemic, worldwide polarization is worsening as many sites such as Facebook and Twitter become echo chambers of misinformation and conspiracy theories. Users on various platforms are both unintentionally and intentionally creating content with the desire to deceive others into believing a potentially dangerous lie. Social media is being weaponized against its users by several different groups, such as governments, surveillance agencies, social media companies, and the users themselves. Governments and surveillance agencies are using social media to spy on the public, and in more restrictive regimes, it is used to locate dissenters. Technology companies are using their social media "product" to collect data from their users and sell it. The right to privacy is slowly being retracted by the unregulated nature of social media.

## **Misinformation**

The term "fake news" is a particularly broad one, encompassing both satirical pieces and genuine pieces intended to misdirect the reader. The broad nature of this term is especially problematic. Due to how vague it is, several people can all have different meanings of the word. The most prevalent definitions of fake news are "fabricated information that mimics news media" and "a statement that the listener or reader personally disagrees with". This lack of a

widely accepted definition received the attention of the United Kingdom's Parliament which resulted in them releasing this statement, "The term 'fake news' is bandied around with no clear idea of what it means, or agreed definition" (House of Commons, 2019). Due to the confusion surrounding the word, it is recommended that the term is replaced with the terms disinformation and misinformation. There are two forms of misinformation, one being disinformation and the other being misinformation. Disinformation is when false information is knowingly being created and shared with the intent to cause harm, while misinformation is when false information is unknowingly created and shared.

Social media platforms encourage the posting and spread of misinformation. Because their algorithms typically promote accounts that are capable of attracting a lot of user attention. User attention is retained through eye-catching news, so accounts consistently post any tidbit of information that seems like it could generate a lot of attention. This forms a habit in users, which eventually devolves into them constantly posting misinformation which becomes widespread due to the following the poster has amassed. Users are willing to share misinformation due to the belief that if the information somehow turns out to be true, then it would be monumental. The less accurate a piece of news appeared to be, the more interesting it was deemed to be. This caused fake news to be shared more frequently than real news. Furthermore, those who have become "infected" by misinformation are likely to post misinformation themselves thus increasing the spread of misinformation.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a major Infowar taking place on the internet. Caused by heavy misinformation regarding the vaccine and overall severity of the contagion, the internet was inundated with fact checkers desperately trying to combat the misinformation being circulated. Parenting and fitness groups began publicly distrusting doctors and medical experts in

order to convince their followers that healthcare-experts are capable of lying for their own gain.

This was an attempt for them to

capitalize on the lucrative business of

natural alternatives to medicine or

supplements. These “influencers”

tried to increase their social media

followings by joining forces with

other anti-vaccine groups and

conspiracy theorists. This resulted in the formation of massive anti-vaccine groups with the goal

of resisting the mandatory vaccination and spreading their misinformation to as many people as

possible. Political groups also began rallying against the vaccine as they were heavily against

being told what to do by the government. In the United States, the anti-vaccine groups convinced

many of their followers that taking the horse dewormer, Ivermectin, was safer than taking the

actual vaccine. Out of the 415,000 total US Covid-19 deaths in 2021, 319,000 of them were

completely preventable. Had those 319,000 people received the full vaccine they would have

survived. Misinformation actively worsened the global death toll of the pandemic and social

media is what allowed this lethal level of misinformation to spread.

Political groups often use misinformation in order to bring public favor down for an

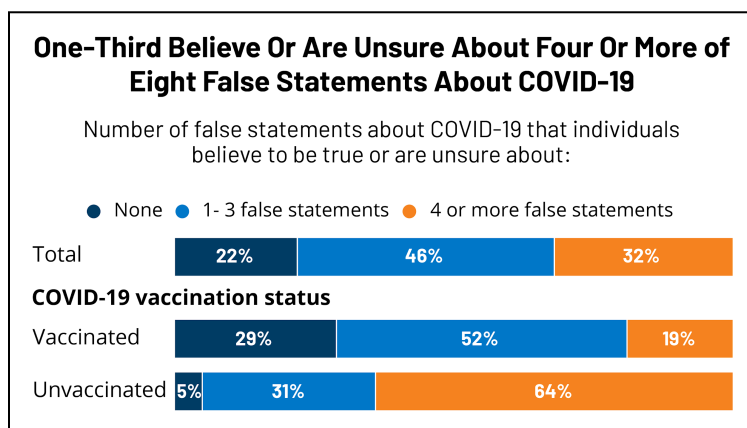
opposing candidate. Brazil and the United States both experienced the fallout of political

weaponization of misinformation, since both of them experienced coup d'etats. Both Jair

Bolsonaro and Donald Trump refused to concede defeat in their respective presidential elections,

and instead propagated the belief that their election was “stolen” by the party that actually won.

Donald Trump and his supporters adamantly challenged the results of the November 3rd



election, by suing counties and trying to force re-counts, claiming that voting machines were tampered with, or claiming that dead people were all voting for Joseph Biden. These claims later became known as “The Big Lie” which completely polarized the entire United States, with one group believing that Joe Biden was the rightful president, and the other believing that the Democratic Party rigged the presidential election so Biden could win. This polarization led to many extremist groups being formed. These groups used disinformation to grow their ranks. The Big Lie culminated in Trump convincing his supporters that on January 6, when Congress was voting to certify the election, that they could stop the vote and defeat the corruption. As a result, 2,000 rioters stormed the United States Capitol building with the intent of forcing the congressmen to declare Trump as the winner of the election. Former Vice President Micheal

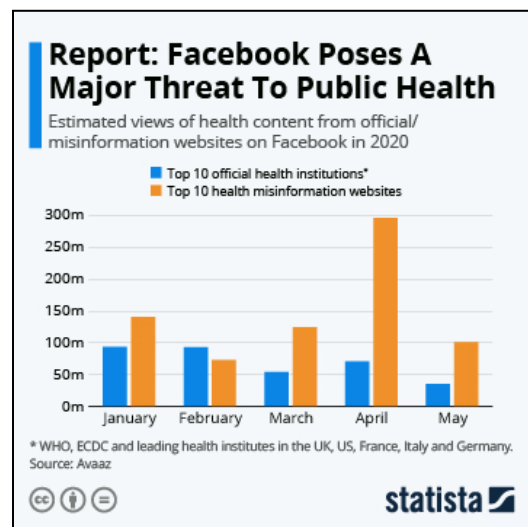
Pence was nearly hung over his refusal to aid Trump’s efforts to overturn the election. The former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was also on the hanging list as many viewed her as one of the leading Democrats behind the “stolen election”. In Brazil, Bolsonaro followed a similar pattern to Trump when it came to denying his election, the key difference being that



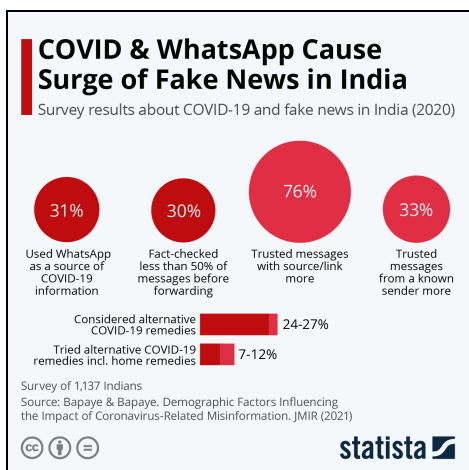
Bolsonaro politicized his nation's armed forces. Due to his constant questioning of the validity of his election and the following disinformation that spread, Bolsanaro’s most radical supporters called for a military coup to overthrow the rightful winner of the presidential election, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. This all peaked on January 8, 2023 when approximately 5,000 Bolsonaro supporters stormed the Praça dos Três Poderes (Plaza of the Three Powers). The plaza contained Brazil’s Supreme Federal Court building, National Congress building, and Palácio do Planalto

(Presidential Palace). These rioters all wanted to use this day to convince the military to take action and remove Lula. Brazil and the US serve as extreme examples of what the political weaponization of misinformation is capable of.

Twitter and Facebook are credited as the two most influential social medias in terms of the spread of misinformation. “Tweets” on Twitter that contain some form of misinformation can reach 1,500 people six times faster than truthful tweets. There was a satirical tweet regarding the famous boxer, Floyd Mayweather, where he wore a hijab to a Donald Trump rally and tried starting a fight with anyone who would confront him. Tweets further spreading this satire were estimated to have reached at least 10,000 users while tweets debunking the satire only had reached a maximum of 1,000 users. The two social media platforms are called “Superspreaders” because of how they promote misinformation and the echo chambers they foster. The popularity of the two superspreaders allow for “trending” posts to reach millions of people, and the lack of action combined with the refusal to terminate the accounts of notorious misinformation spreaders is what gave the two platforms their title. The fact-checking website NewsGuard flagged twenty-six accounts to Twitter for their Covid-19 related disinformation spreading, and of those accounts only thirteen accounts were terminated while the other half saw a gain in 358,927 new followers. On Facebook, fifty-nine accounts were flagged with only twenty-eight being terminated, and the remaining thirty-one saw 718,000 new “likes” on their posts.



Despite the popularity of the two superspreaders as social media platforms, the messaging platform WhatsApp proves as a far more dangerous spreader of misinformation than the two superspreaders combined. WhatsApp has about two billion users worldwide, those users having



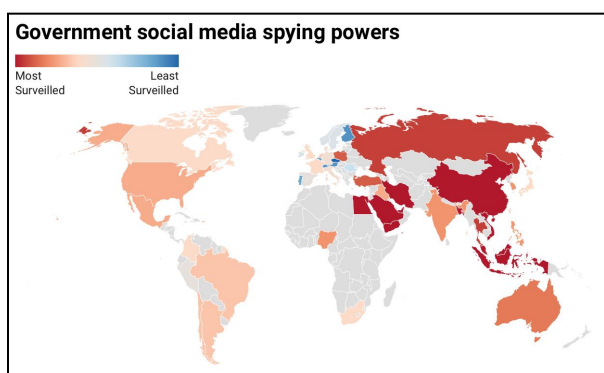
complete access to private and unmonitored chat rooms.

Those unmonitored chat rooms have no way to call out misinformation unless a member does it themselves. Being sheltered from fact-checkers allows misinformation to freely spread across families and friends. The chat rooms are so heavily encrypted that not even the company behind WhatsApp is capable of monitoring or checking the discussions. This is not a WhatsApp issue alone, it is a

problem that involves every private messaging app in the world. Other serious misinformation spreaders are the messaging apps Kakao, Telegram, and WeChat. The encryption is one of the main draws to these apps, meaning that any attempted interference or monitoring could result in severe consequences for the parent companies. On these apps, everyone receiving messages from each other has some form of bond with each other. This bond implies users trust the people they message with, thus they are more likely to believe misinformation that is shared to them. The communities most affected by the misinformation spread are immigrant communities that depend on these apps to communicate with their friends and loved ones from their country of origin. These communities are so drastically impacted because misinformation can make any situation seem drastic. During periods of violence, relatives in other countries can be led to believe that the violence is nonexistent or the worst thing to ever happen in the region. During periods when the truth is so desperately needed, messaging apps help scuttle that truth up.

## Government Surveillance

Nine in every ten, or 89% of the population of people who use the internet, are being actively monitored while online. This is a total of three billion people. The most significant reason behind the high number of people being monitored is the influx of government surveillance technologies. For instance, China currently has several brand new platforms and technologies that are capable of monitoring hundreds of millions of citizens at one time, while



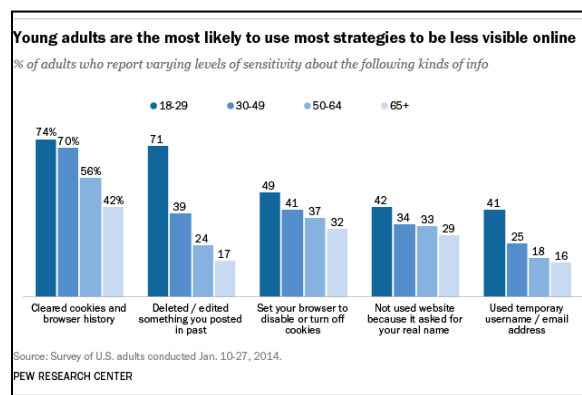
the US has been funding data mining tools with the intention of using them in investigations regarding serious crimes. A primary concern regarding these new government surveillance technologies is that they are being used to screen travelers for their political views, track students' behavior, or monitor

activists and protesters. The UK is monitoring around nine thousand activists, and none of them have any sort of a criminal record. Typically a government will either track a user's geological location, or use sentiment analysis to determine the user's opinions regarding specific topics. Geolocation is tracked by identifying the towers one is connected to and measuring the time delay that a signal takes to make a round trip between the towers and one's phone. Bluetooth and public Wi-Fi networks are also commonly used because manufacturers can track one's phone via Bluetooth which they often use to send one a targeted advertisement, and public Wi-Fi servers keep a receipt of the media access control (MAC) address of one's phone which can be used to keep logs of places one has visited. Frequently used by police forces are Stingrays, which act as cell towers but provide a stronger service. The stronger service forces a phone to switch from the nearby cell tower to the Stingray which allows the police to track the device owner as long as



they are near the Stingray. The Saudi Arabian government used geolocation tracking on the journalist Jamal Khashoggi before he was allegedly assassinated by them. The political system of nations has very little effect upon their surveillance rates of journalists. In democracies, around 75% of journalists are under some form of government surveillance. Meanwhile in non-democracies, it is estimated that 80% of all journalists are currently being surveilled by their respective government.

Once someone believes that they are being monitored, they begin censoring themselves on social media. Their likelihood to post or interact with posts goes down significantly, and many become too cautious regarding their messages with other users. High levels of surveillance directly correlate to declining rates of self expression. Out of eight hundred writers surveyed (all of which live in democracies), 53% of them reported that they self-censor due to fears of governmental surveillance. After Edward Snowden revealed that several surveillance groups such as the National Security Agency (NSA) are spying on everyone regardless of prior criminal behavior or suspicious activity. The Pew Research Center conducted numerous studies following the revelations revealed by Snowden, and the center found that 86% of American internet users take steps to mask their internet behavior in some form.



The United States is particularly egregious in social media surveillance, as there have been several reports where police departments specifically target the social media of people of color. The New York Police Department wrongfully arrested Jelani Henry for attempted murder, and held him in jail for a year and a half. The prosecutors believed his own photos and liked posts on

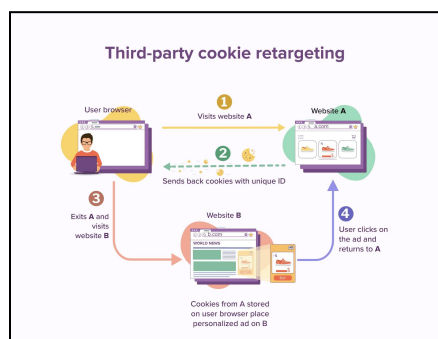
social media revealed that he partook in gang activity. Additionally, a Palestinian student was denied entry into the country and prevented from studying at Harvard because of the content on his friends social media feed. The content was highly critical of the US government, but the student never once interacted with any of the mentioned posts. This “assumed criminality” disproportionately affects Blacks, Latinos, and Muslims. In 2016, the US began asking foreign travelers to voluntarily provide their social media “handles”. The accounts are manually investigated in order to assess if the person is a potential danger to the country. Under the Trump administration, travelers from predominantly Muslim countries were forced to give up their social media handles. Out of 1,500 refugees that have been screened it was determined that the process was completely useless except in a small number of cases.

Recently, it was confirmed by the parent company of TikTok, ByteDance, that they were using their app to spy on journalists who reported on the company. The company affirmed the allegations that they were stealing user data (mainly from American users) and sharing it with China. A Chinese exchange student who was living in the US posted a video on TikTok which was highly critical of the Chinese government. Shortly after, the student’s parents were interrogated by the government. Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States among other countries are all pushing for the app to be banned on the phones of government officials, with those countries even considering banning the usage of the app outright. Due to the fact that ByteDance is headquartered in Beijing, China, it is widely believed that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has enough control over the company where they can access the data of all the global TikTok users. In 2017, the CCP passed the National Security Law which requires all Chinese companies to assist, cooperate, and support any national

intelligence effort. ByteDance argues that because they are officially centered in the Cayman Islands, they have no obligation to follow the National Security Law.

## Stealing Data

Data collection is a necessary part of the business model that social media companies employ. By tracking a user's recent searches, commonly liked posts, and public information the user themselves displays, this information can be gathered and sold to advertisers. Simple things such as if a user owns pets, or if they have children can be sold and turned into personalized advertisements. This information is also collected by scammers so they can gain better access to a user's personal information. In 2021, more than 90,000 people fell victim to social media fraud, which resulted in an estimated 770 million dollars in damages. Typically data is collected through tracking "cookies". There are two forms of cookies, those being first party cookies and third party cookies. First party cookies are used to track a user's behavior on the specific platform/website, and remember the user if they ever visit the site again. These are often used to



optimize a user's subsequent visits. Third party cookies are usually created by advertisers and are displayed as pop-ups, or displayed somewhere on the website. These are controlled by third parties which enables them to view a user's behavior on sites with those cookies, or, if consent is given, they enable the third party to view the user's behavior on the entire internet.

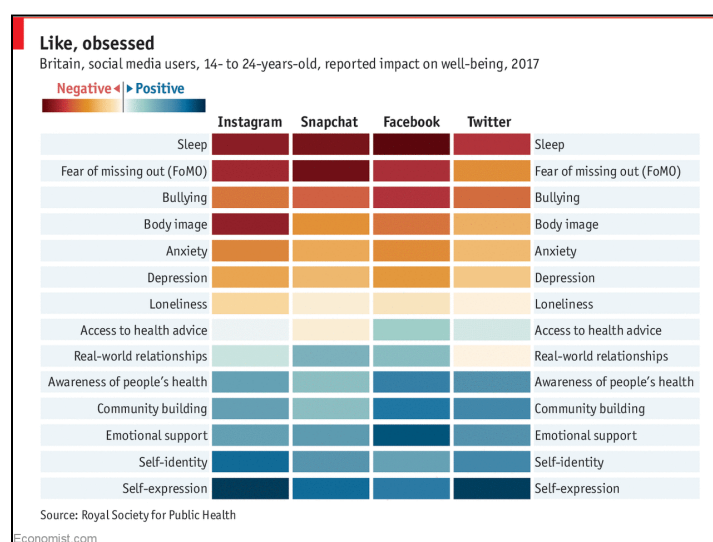
Data breaches are becoming more common as social media continues to reach new levels of popularity. The bigger the platform, the more likely it is that a small bug can be exploited for hackers to gain access to the data of millions of users. Facebook has experienced a total of eight

major data breaches which have resulted in two billion Facebook users having their data stolen. The most recent Facebook data breach in 2021 led to all 533 million users who had their data stolen being at risk for follow-up phishing scams. Even more recently, in November of 2022, 5.4 million Twitter users had their personal information stolen and sold to various “dark-web” buyers. Since 2013, approximately 5.1 billion social media accounts have had their data stolen through data breaches.

## Impact on Mental Health

Social media contains an excessive amount of “posts” that only feature the best moments in one’s life. Such constant streams of seeing others’ joy or achievements can make the viewer start feeling that their own life is inadequate. This inadequacy leads to feelings of sadness, loneliness, dissatisfaction, and frustration. Social media

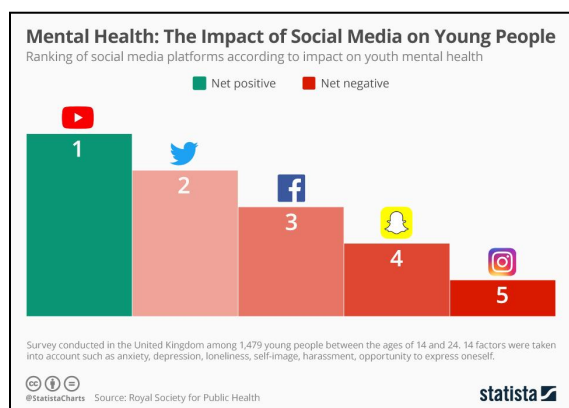
can promote constant comparison between the lives of the users, and this comparison is what leads to the development of anxiety or depression. Comparing your appearance or life to another’s can make one either dissatisfied with their own life or incredibly self-conscious regarding their appearance. This comparison is most detrimental to adolescents, due to the fact that their bodies are changing and they are actively exposed to filtered pictures. These filters can make one look perfect in ways that are physically unobtainable, such as teeth whitening filters or airbrushing. Social media also exposes adolescents to people who have received plastic surgery



or are taking steroids to even further improve their appearance. Constantly seeing bodybuilders, models, or just “normal” people looking so perfect can drive someone to feeling incredibly self-conscious regarding their appearance and start viewing themselves as ugly. This problem is most commonly experienced by girls from the ages of 10-14. In 2017, a study was conducted that analyzed depression and suicide rates within 500,000 students from 8-12 grade. The study found there was a 33% increase in students with high levels of depression and a 31% increase in suicides. The suicide rate going up was driven mostly by females.

Social media is also capable of increasing feelings of stress in adolescents. This happens in adolescents who are particularly obsessed with their self-image, as when they make a post they begin to worry that the post will not receive as many likes or comments as they had hoped. The teen may then compare their post to another user’s post which leads to them worrying about why their post did not receive as much attention as other’s posts. Stress is caused over the amount of likes and comments one’s post will receive.

The social media most responsible for mental health related issues is Instagram. In a recent



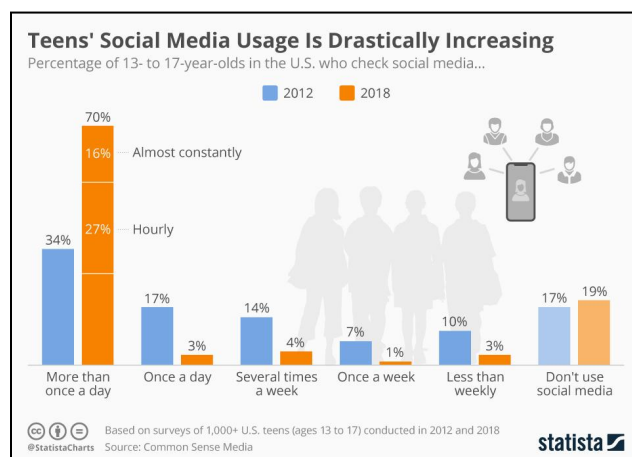
survey geared specifically towards Generation Z people or “Gen Zers”, it was found that 68% of respondents claimed that Instagram had the most negative impact on their self esteem. It was reported that the more strangers one follows on Instagram the more likely they are to experience serious depression. People that follow higher numbers of strangers, are likely to feel that others have

better lives and that life in general is not fair. Only sharing your most positive experiences is encouraged on Instagram and the more strangers people see living their best lives leads to

feelings of envy. Instagram as a whole forces users to inadvertently compare themselves to the people they follow and in developing adolescents this leads to the development of depression as mentioned earlier. Instagram also dramatically worsens one's fear of missing out (FOMO) by constantly showcasing all the events that they were not invited to or could not attend. Overall, Instagram is capable of worsening one's self consciousness or other depression inducing feelings to the point where this platform is highly responsible for the loss of a lot of people's self esteem.

Additionally, social media encourages risk taking behavior. A majority of all adolescents use social media from 3-5 hours a day, with most of them using at least three different social medias. About 1 in 8 adolescents have

engaged in some form of self-harm with the mean onset age being 11.8 years. Around 1 in 4 adolescents have shared at least one sexually explicit message. It was determined that for every additional social media platform that an adolescent uses, their odds



for engaging in self-harm or sharing a sexually explicit message goes up by 1.11-2.48%. Social media provides a platform that allows for adolescents to expose themselves to the concepts of self-harm or “sexting” and these platforms may normalize the behavior. The normalization comes from the communities of people online engaging in this behavior via social media, thus allowing anyone to stumble across these communities. Increased exposure to these communities allows for their ideals to be perpetuated, ultimately leading to more “outsiders” partaking in the risky behavior being promoted. The higher daily length spent on social media, the higher chance that an adolescent will engage in some form of risky behavior, with the more platforms they use

also increasing those odds. For example, if an adolescent spent approximately 4 hours each day on social media, and they used 5 different forms of social media, that adolescent would have a 6.445% chance of engaging in some form of self harm or sexting.

The platform most well known for encouraging risky behavior is TikTok. TikTok very commonly has popular trends going around on the site, and the high popularity of these trends typically encourages most users to participate in them. One such example is the “Devious Lick” trend where users post videos of themselves showing off something that they stole (typically an object from their school). The most common items stolen were from the bathroom, including the toilet seat, sink, paper towel/soap dispenser, to the entire stall door. This trend is a prime example of the risky behavior increasing factor of social media; a small group of people posting videos of themselves stealing encouraged so many students that it reached the attention of several news outlets. A more physically dangerous trend that TikTok popularized was the milk crate challenge. This challenge involved users stacking milk crates in a stair like manner and they were tasked with climbing the crates without falling off them. Those who fell because of this challenge were likely to experience dislocated shoulders, rotator cuff tears, ACL tears, meniscus tears, broken wrists and even spinal cord injuries. This trend got so bad that it nearly killed several users. These TikTok trends act as a method of peer pressure where the sheer volume of users participating in them makes other users feel left out if they do not join in. TikTok is capable of taking an already impressionable group of people and exposing them to extremely dangerous behaviors or mindsets.

## Questions for Debate

- How much control should a government hold over a corporation?
- Should social media posts be protected under free speech laws?
- Is privacy a human right?
- What is an effective way to regulate social media?
- What level of government surveillance is acceptable?
- Does social media pose a serious threat to our society?



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