

The Engineering of Social Media Addiction: Strategies, Impact, and Policy Recommendations

Executive Summary

This report analyses contemporary issues surrounding social media companies such as privacy and addiction. We initiate the discussion by analysing scandals relating to selling user data to political organisations without explicit consent, raising questions over the power dynamics of these platforms. Besides selling data, another key issue is leveraging human neurology, along with behavioural data, to retain users. Specifically, the outcome of exploitative algorithms have harmful, addictive effects to the user, akin to drug usage (e.g. playing on dopamine receptors). Users tend to consume content that is gradually more extreme, that which is “echoed” by the algorithms. Social media algorithms are notoriously quick to catch on to what users like, leading users down rabbit holes. Ultimately, this type of user retention via extremism leads to phenomena like dangerous subcultures, and even violence. The numbers are significant: roughly 50% of the general population admitted either to moderate or serious addiction to social media. The outcome of addictive social media consumption is anxiety, depression, loneliness, extremist acts, and more.

To tackle these issues, we first note that a general outright ban is unfavorable, due to the notable benefits of social media as well, such as allowing businesses to gain traction locally and globally. Prior to our main solution, we attempt to propose alternative solutions. Ultimately, we decided these alternative solutions were unfavorable, but they still expanded our perspective on the matter.

Our main solution is two-part: educating society holistically about social media, as well as enforcing transparency and reporting by social media companies. This two-part recommendation is an equitable solution that protects ‘trade secrets’, in turn promoting innovation, yet through education looks out for future generations. Still, while the main solution provides a solid foundation, we note that there may be residual concerns pertaining to practicality. Specifically, we ask whether addiction can manifest even after implementation. Further, we refer to Marxist principles and historical events as instruction on expected resistance to change and corruption, which help us better understand our recommendations.

Moving forward, we encourage further consulting, involving multiple disciplines such as psychologists, neurologists, engineers, and even politicians, to build and refine our recommendation.