

**Title:** Comparative Analysis of Case Studies: Patterns of Human Behaviour in Digitally Mediated Environments *Don't F\*\*k with Cats* and *The Social Dilemma*.

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**Course:** [Documentary Studies]

**Version:** [American English]

**Date:** [March 2026]

## 1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become central to social life, mediating interactions, shaping identity, and influencing collective action on an unprecedented scale. Two documentaries, *Don't F\*\*k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (Netflix, 2019) and *The Social Dilemma* (Netflix, 2020), offer rich case studies for understanding these dynamics. While the former examines online communities pursuing justice in response to criminal activity, the latter interrogates the systemic and psychological mechanisms that govern social media engagement.

At first glance, the subjects appear divergent: one narrates a moral crusade against criminality; the other critiques the structural design of digital platforms. Yet, a closer examination reveals overlapping behavioural, psychological, and ethical patterns. Both highlight the interplay between human cognition, collective behaviour, and technological mediation, demonstrating how online environments simultaneously empower and constrain action.

This comparative study aims to identify and analyze these patterns, focusing on five thematic axes: identity performance, obsessive engagement, collective intelligence and echo chambers, emotional and moral amplification, and ethical ambiguity. Through a detailed cross-case analysis, the study highlights the similarities and differences between the two phenomena, situating both within broader socio-technical and psychological frameworks.

## 2. Identity Performance and the Curated Self

Identity construction emerges as a central theme in both cases. In *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, participants adopt online personas that convey expertise, moral authority, and dedication to justice. Pseudonyms, curated posts, and careful engagement strategies allow users to signal credibility and commitment within

the investigative community. The performance of identity in this context is closely tied to social recognition and peer reinforcement, creating a feedback loop in which self-presentation both motivates and constrains behaviour.

Similarly, *The Social Dilemma* illustrates that social media platforms systematically reward curated self-representation. Users are encouraged to present idealized versions of themselves, engage in impression management, and seek validation through likes, shares, and algorithmically amplified reactions. Turkle's (2011) concept of the "digital self" captures this duality: online identity is simultaneously independent and performance based, shaped by individual choices and structural incentives.

Both documentaries demonstrate that identity performance is not merely cosmetic. It influences attention, social status, and moral positioning within communities. In the investigative community of *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, credibility affects the reach and influence of information; on social media platforms, engagement metrics and algorithmic reinforcement determine visibility and influence. In both cases, digital environments mediate self-expression, amplifying behaviours that align with social and systemic incentives.

### **3. Obsession and Compulsive Engagement**

Compulsive engagement is a striking commonality. In *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, online investigators exhibit sustained attention and deep emotional investment. Users repeatedly engage with content, track updates, and contribute to discussions over extended periods. Reinforcement occurs socially, through peer validation, and cognitively, through the satisfaction of solving puzzles and uncovering clues.

*The Social Dilemma* shifts the focus from narrative-driven obsession to systemically engineered engagement. Platforms exploit cognitive biases, including variable rewards, novelty-seeking, and social validation, to encourage repeated interactions (Fogg, 2003). Notifications, trending feeds, and algorithmic recommendations create a persistent sense of urgency, resulting in compulsive consumption patterns.

Despite these differences, both cases reveal feedback loops where engagement fuels further involvement. In *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, each clue or update strengthens emotional commitment; in *The Social Dilemma*, every interaction reinforces algorithmic cues, deepening platform dependence. These dynamics underscore the intersection of psychological predispositions, social reinforcement, and technological design in shaping sustained behavioural patterns.

#### **4. Collective Intelligence, Coordination, and Echo Chambers**

Collective action and distributed problem-solving are prominent in both contexts, albeit manifesting differently. In *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, participants leverage collective intelligence to investigate criminal activity. Online communities pool expertise, share insights, and iteratively test hypotheses, demonstrating the potential for coordinated problem-solving. Jenkins et al. (2013) describe this as the promise of “spreadable media,” where collaboration amplifies effectiveness through distributed knowledge.

Conversely, *The Social Dilemma* illustrates the structural conditions under which collective behaviour occurs. Algorithms encourage homophily, reinforcing ideological alignment and producing echo chambers (Sunstein, 2009). While users can mobilize knowledge or action collectively, the design of networks often amplifies bias and polarization, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

Both documentaries highlight a tension between the benefits and risks of online coordination. In the investigative community, collaborative insight occasionally produces misidentifications or overreach; in social media environments, algorithmically amplified discourse intensifies division. These cases reveal that collective intelligence is inherently contingent upon structural, social, and technological factors, and that collaboration is neither inherently virtuous nor inherently harmful.

#### **5. Emotional and Moral Amplification**

Emotion plays a pivotal role in driving engagement across both contexts. In *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, the graphic and morally charged nature of the crimes triggers outrage, empathy, and a sense of moral duty. Emotional intensity motivates sustained involvement, reinforces group cohesion, and legitimizes investigative efforts.

*The Social Dilemma* demonstrates that platforms capitalize on similar dynamics at scale. Content that provokes emotional responses like outrage, fear, and empathy spreads more effectively, increasing visibility and engagement (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Bandura's (1999) framework of moral disengagement helps explain why users may engage in ethically ambiguous actions: normalization of behaviour and collective reinforcement reduce perceived individual responsibility.

In both cases, emotional amplification creates a feedback loop linking cognition, affect, and social interaction. Moral intensity motivates action, which generates visibility, reinforcing engagement and shaping subsequent behaviour.

The structural amplification of emotion whether by human curiosity or algorithmic design demonstrates the entanglement of psychological, social and technological drivers.

## **6. Digital Vigilantism and Algorithmic Governance**

Both works reveal the perception of agency and enforcement in digital environments. *Don't F\*\*k with Cats* depicts participants acting as digital vigilantes, investigating, identifying, and attempting to hold perpetrators accountable. The absence of formal authority is compensated by moral conviction and community consensus, illustrating the empowerment and risks associated with decentralized enforcement.

In *The Social Dilemma*, users participate indirectly in algorithmically mediated governance. Likes, shares, and engagement patterns shape what content is amplified, effectively reinforcing social norms and platform priorities. Trottier (2017) and Zuboff (2019) converge here: whether through overt vigilance or algorithmic shaping, actions have real-world consequences, and responsibility is distributed across users, designers, and platform infrastructure.

These cases highlight the ethical ambiguity of perceived enforcement. Misidentification, harassment, and unintended harm occur in both contexts, demonstrating that digital empowerment comes with complex moral responsibilities.

## **7. Ethical Ambiguity and Distributed Responsibility**

Ethical complexity is a shared feature. In *Don't F\*\*k with Cats*, responsibility is diffused among participants and across the platform itself. Good intentions coexist with harmful consequences, highlighting the limits of individual moral control. In *The Social Dilemma*, structural incentives prioritize engagement over ethical reflection, creating conflicts between user intention and system outcomes.

Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism provides a lens for understanding these dynamics. Platforms are designed to shape behaviour, exploit attention, and monetize engagement, complicating traditional notions of responsibility. Both documentaries illustrate that moral accountability in digital spaces is multi-layered, extending beyond individual action to encompass social norms, community pressures, and systemic design.

## **8. Methodological and Theoretical Connections**

Both studies employ qualitative, interpretive methodologies emphasizing thematic, narrative, and discourse analysis. They prioritize understanding social meaning and behavioural dynamics rather than causal determinism. Theoretical frameworks overlap substantially: social learning theory, moral disengagement, deindividuation, collective intelligence, attention economy, and digital vigilantism offer conceptual tools to interpret behaviour in digitally mediated environments.

These shared approaches allow for comparative insight: despite differences in subject matter, criminal investigation versus platform-mediated engagement the underlying psychological, social, and structural mechanisms show remarkable convergence. This highlights the potential for cross-contextual learning in digital behaviour research.

## 9. Implications for Digital Society

The comparative analysis has several significant implications:

1. **Design and Ethical Responsibility:** Platforms influence behaviour at scale. Ethical design must account for attention manipulation, emotional amplification, and collective impact.
2. **Critical Media Literacy:** Users must develop awareness of algorithmic influence, echo chambers, and moral contagion to navigate digital spaces responsibly.
3. **Distributed Accountability:** Behaviour is co-constructed by individuals, communities, and platforms. Interventions must address structural, social, and technological factors.
4. **Research and Policy:** Comparative studies reveal generalised patterns of behaviour, informing policy, education, and platform governance strategies.

## 10. Conclusion

Comparing *Don't F\*\*k with Cats* and *The Social Dilemma* reveals that digitally mediated behaviour emerges from the interaction of cognition, social dynamics, and technology. Both documentaries demonstrate recurring patterns: identity performance, obsessive engagement, collective intelligence, emotional amplification, digital vigilantism, and ethical ambiguity.

The comparison underscores the co-constructed nature of online behaviour: users, communities, and platforms continuously shape and respond to one another. Digitally mediated behaviour is simultaneously personal, social, and structural, producing outcomes that are neither fully predictable nor easily controllable.

These insights extend beyond the case studies. They provide a foundation for understanding digital behaviour, guiding research, ethical reflection, and policy interventions. As platforms continue to permeate social life, the lessons from both documentaries are critical: whether pursuing justice or navigating algorithmic environments, understanding the mechanisms of influence, engagement, and moral complexity is essential for responsible participation in digital society.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Behavioural Coding Table – Comparative Study

| Category                                           | Example Behaviours                            | Observed in <i>Don't F**k with Cats</i>                     | Observed in <i>The Social Dilemma</i>                           | Cross-Case Insights                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Identity Performance</b>                        | Curated posts, pseudonyms, persona projection | User profiles, community status signalling                  | Profile curation, idealized self-representation                 | Both contexts show users actively managing self-presentation; visibility and social validation drive behaviour   |
| <b>Obsessive Engagement</b>                        | Repeated scrolling, prolonged focus           | Continuous monitoring of suspects and discussions           | Algorithmically reinforced content consumption                  | Engagement loops are psychologically reinforced in both cases; obsession is socially and structurally mediated   |
| <b>Collective Intelligence &amp; Coordination</b>  | Knowledge sharing, hypothesis testing         | Community investigations, distributed problem-solving       | Content sharing, trending topic propagation                     | Collaboration benefits are amplified by networks; misidentification or polarization risk exists in both contexts |
| <b>Emotional / Moral Amplification</b>             | Outrage, empathy, moral justification         | Strong moral response to animal cruelty, investigative zeal | Sharing outrage-inducing or emotionally provocative content     | Emotion drives engagement and feedback loops; moral intensity mediates behaviour                                 |
| <b>Digital Vigilantism / Algorithmic Influence</b> | Enforcement, social pressure                  | Investigative community acting as moral enforcers           | Users' actions shaping content visibility and reinforcing norms | Both demonstrate distributed responsibility and perceived authority; consequences                                |

| Category                                       | Example Behaviours                          | Observed in <i>Don't F**k with Cats</i>             | Observed in <i>The Social Dilemma</i>                  | Cross-Case Insights                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ethical Ambiguity</b>                       | Conflicted decision-making, unintended harm | Misidentifications, potential harassment            | Engagement contributing to echo chambers, polarization | can be unintended<br>Responsibility is multi-layered; individual intentions may conflict with structural outcomes<br>Loops amplify behaviour and emotional investment, |
| <b>Feedback Loops &amp; Platform Mediation</b> | Engagement leading to reinforcement         | Peer recognition, validation, ongoing participation | Algorithmic recommendation, trending metrics           | highlighting interplay between social and technological forces                                                                                                         |

## Appendix B: Comparative Timeline of Key Events

| Stage | <i>Don't F**k with Cats</i>                        | <i>The Social Dilemma</i>                         | Cross-Case Connection                                            |
|-------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1     | Early platform interaction and forum participation | Social media adoption and proliferation           | Both studies begin with user engagement and platform immersion   |
| 2     | Initial content discovery and investigation        | Algorithmic content curation begins               | Users encounter system-mediated content that shapes attention    |
| 3     | Escalation of emotional engagement                 | Amplification of emotionally provocative content  | Moral/emotional intensity motivates action and sharing           |
| 4     | Collective coordination and hypothesis testing     | Collective influence through network effects      | Collaboration emerges, producing both insight and potential harm |
| 5     | Outcomes: justice achieved or ethical dilemmas     | Social, psychological, and political consequences | Behaviour produces real-world outcomes,                          |



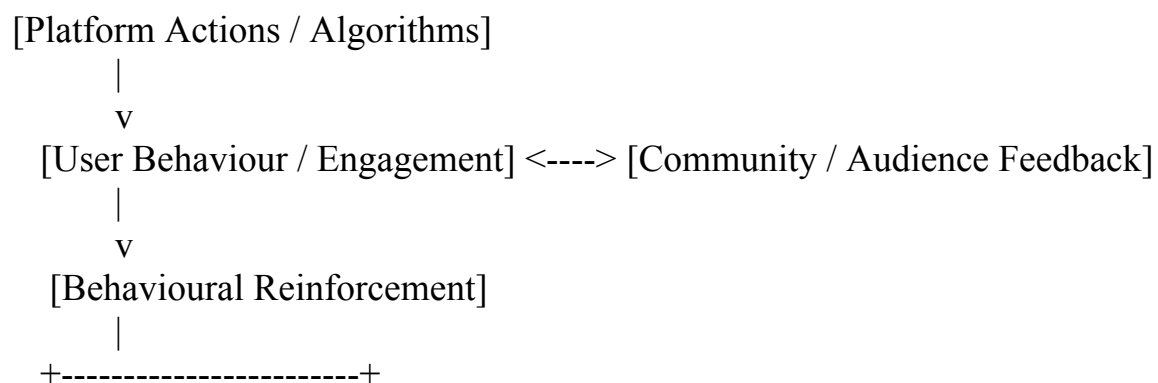
| Stage | <i>Don't F**k with Cats</i> | <i>The Social Dilemma</i> | Cross-Case Connection                        |
|-------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
|       |                             |                           | illustrating structural and social influence |

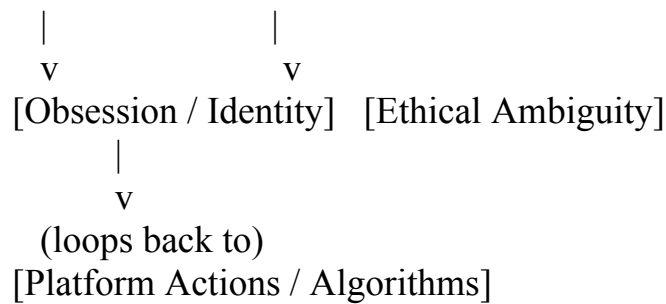
## Appendix C: Feedback Loops Diagram – Comparative Study (Text-Based)

### Core Components

1. **Platform / Environmental Actions**
  - o Content curation, recommendation algorithms
  - o Trending metrics, engagement-driven amplification
  - o Moderation policies (or lack thereof)
2. **User Behaviour**
  - o Identity construction and management
  - o Emotional and moral engagement
  - o Participation in collective action or investigations
3. **Community / Audience Interaction**
  - o Peer validation, commentary, sharing
  - o Reinforcement of norms and collective sentiment
  - o Spread of outrage, empathy, or moral judgement
4. **Feedback Loops**
  - o User actions → Platform amplification → Community response → User behaviour
  - o Emotional/moral intensity increases engagement
  - o Visibility reinforces identity performance and compulsive behaviour
5. **Ethical & Psychological Mediators**
  - o Moral reasoning and disengagement
  - o Obsession, compulsion, and engagement loops
  - o Structural incentives versus individual responsibility

### Text-Based Flow Diagram





## Appendix D: Comparative Theoretical Mapping

| Behavioural Theme                         | Theoretical Lens                         | <i>Don't F**k with Cats</i>                      | <i>The Social Dilemma</i>                          |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Identity Performance                      | Turkle (2011) – Digital Self             | Curated investigative personas                   | Profile curation, impression management            |
| Obsession / Compulsive Engagement         | Fogg (2003) – Persuasive Technology      | Reinforcement via peer validation                | Algorithmic amplification of engagement            |
| Collective Intelligence                   | Jenkins et al. (2013) – Spreadable Media | Community problem-solving, distributed expertise | Knowledge sharing within networked platforms       |
| Echo Chambers / Polarization              | Sunstein (2009) – Like-Minded Networks   | Community consensus, selective attention         | Algorithmically reinforced filter bubbles          |
| Emotional Amplification                   | Bandura (1999) – Moral Disengagement     | Outrage and empathy driving engagement           | Viral spread of emotionally charged content        |
| Digital Vigilantism / Algorithmic Justice | Trottier (2017), Zuboff (2019)           | Participants enforcing social norms              | Users' engagement shaping visibility and influence |
| Ethical Ambiguity                         | Zuboff (2019) – Surveillance Capitalism  | Diffused responsibility in investigative action  | Structural incentives override moral intent        |