

The Power Structure of Social Media and Its Impact on Young Adults

Wadhah Altraiji
Department of English, Arizona State University
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Professor : Tonya Eick
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Abstract

This paper examines how social media affects young adults through a system of unequal power among stakeholders. While young users are the most impacted, they have the least control over how platforms function. Social media companies and economic stakeholders hold the most power by designing algorithms and features that maximize user engagement and profit. Influencers and advertisers further shape user behavior by promoting content that influences identity and decision-making. As a result, excessive use of social media has been linked to negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and reduced attention span. Although families, schools, and policymakers attempt to address these issues, their influence remains limited compared to platform designers. This paper argues that the imbalance of power within the social media system allows these negative effects to continue, highlighting the need for greater responsibility from those who control digital platforms.

Keywords: Social media, young adults, stakeholder power, algorithms, digital behavior, mental health, influencers, advertising, user engagement, online platforms.

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Young adults often open apps like Instagram or TikTok for a few minutes, but before they realize it, hours have passed. What feels like a simple habit is actually part of a larger system designed to keep users engaged. This effect is especially strong among young people because their brains are still developing, particularly in areas related to reward and social feedback. Studies show that adolescents are more sensitive to online interactions such as likes and comments, which increases their likelihood of continued use (Crone & Konijn, 2018). Over time, this repeated engagement has been associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among young users (Twenge et al., 2018). However, this issue is not only about individual behavior. It is shaped by a network of stakeholders who influence how social media is designed and used. This paper argues that stakeholders in the social media system are arranged in a clear hierarchy of power, where social media companies and economic stakeholders hold the greatest power and autonomy, influencers and advertisers shape behavior with moderate influence, and young adults despite being the most affected have the least agency, which allows the system to continue reinforcing negative outcomes.

At the center of this system are young adults, as they are the primary users and the group most directly affected by social media. Their habits, emotions, and even self-perceptions are influenced by what they see and experience online (Crone & Konijn, 2018; Nesi et al., 2018). Despite being central to the system, they have limited control over how platforms operate. Their behavior is shaped by external factors such as algorithms, advertising, and social expectations, which reduces their level of autonomy (Zuboff, 2019; Chaudhary, 2024). These factors guide users toward certain content and behaviors without them fully realizing it, making their choices feel automatic rather than intentional. It is difficult to break away from this influence because

features like notifications, endless scrolling, and likes create habit-forming loops that keep users engaged (Montag & Elhai, 2020; Nutt et al., 2015).

Social media companies hold the greatest amount of power because they control platform design and functionality (Zuboff, 2019). Algorithms determine what content users see and how frequently they see it, often prioritizing content that generates strong emotional reactions (Montag & Elhai, 2020). Features such as notifications, personalized feeds, and continuous scrolling are designed to increase the amount of time users spend on the platform (Montag & Elhai, 2020). This approach ensures that user attention remains high, which directly benefits the company. This system is ideal for companies because the more time users spend on the platform, the more advertisements they are exposed to, increasing revenue. Companies profit by selling user attention and data to advertisers, making engagement their main goal (Zuboff, 2019; Chaudhary, 2024). As a result, they have little incentive to change these features, since reducing user engagement would lead to lower profits.

Economic stakeholders, including investors and data brokers, strengthen this system. Investors expect companies to grow and increase profits, which encourages the continued development of engagement-focused features. Data brokers collect and sell user information, allowing advertisers to deliver highly targeted content. This system turns user behavior into a valuable resource that supports a larger digital economy (Zuboff, 2019). These economic incentives directly influence how algorithms are designed, as platforms prioritize content that keeps users engaged for longer periods of time. By analyzing user data, algorithms continuously adjust and personalize content, making it more appealing and harder for users to disengage (Montag & Elhai, 2020).

Influencers and advertisers also play a major role in shaping user behavior, although their power is less direct than that of social media companies, which control the platforms and algorithms themselves. Influencers present curated content that can affect how young people view themselves and others. This often leads to social comparison and changes in identity or lifestyle choices. Research shows that influencers can influence both behavior and purchasing decisions, especially among younger audiences (Chaudhary, 2024; Lajnef, 2023). Advertisers use this influence by integrating promotional content into everyday posts, making it less obvious that users are being targeted. This covert form of advertising makes content more addictive because users engage with it as entertainment rather than recognizing it as marketing, which increases emotional attachment and repeated use (Montag & Elhai, 2020).

The role of platform design connects these stakeholders. Algorithms adjust content based on user behavior, reinforcing patterns over time. This creates a cycle in which users are exposed to similar types of content repeatedly, increasing engagement and shaping perceptions. Scientific research suggests that repeated exposure to rewarding stimuli can lead to habit formation, making it more difficult for users to disengage (Nutt et al., 2015; Montag & Elhai, 2020). Overall, this shows that social media is not just influenced by individual choices, but by a system where powerful stakeholders design platforms to maximize engagement, while users have limited control over their behavior.

Young adults are particularly affected because their cognitive development is still ongoing. Areas related to decision-making and impulse control are not fully developed, which makes it harder to resist immediate rewards. Social media platforms take advantage of this by offering constant feedback and stimulation. Features such as notifications and time-sensitive

content encourage repeated use and create a sense of urgency. Research also shows that heavy media multitasking can reduce attention control and cognitive performance (Ophir et al., 2009). Research indicates that digital environments play a significant role in shaping adolescent behavior and emotional development (Nesi et al., 2018). As a result, it is difficult for young people to disengage because they have not yet fully developed the ability to regulate these behaviors. They are more likely to fall victim to platform design strategies without recognizing the potential harm they may cause (Montag & Elhai, 2020).

Other stakeholders, such as families, schools, and mental health professionals, respond to the effects of social media use. Families may attempt to set limits, and schools may provide guidance on digital literacy. Mental health professionals address issues such as anxiety, reduced attention span, and emotional distress linked to excessive use (Swingle, 2016; Ophir et al., 2009). However, these groups do not have the authority to change how platforms are designed, which limits their overall influence.

Governments and policymakers attempt to regulate the digital environment through laws and policies related to privacy and safety. However, technological advancements often move faster than regulation, making it difficult to enforce effective control. Research shows that gaps in regulation allow digital platforms to continue operating with limited oversight (Yadav, 2025). This lack of government oversight is important because it allows companies to prioritize profit over user well-being without accountability. Without stronger regulation, harmful design practices and data exploitation can continue unchecked, making it necessary to address these gaps to better protect users.

Overall, the system is structured in a way that concentrates power among social media companies and economic stakeholders, while young users have the least control despite being the most affected. Influencers and advertisers reinforce engagement patterns, and support systems respond to the consequences rather than preventing them. This imbalance explains why the issue continues to persist.

In conclusion, the impact of social media on young adults is shaped by a system in which power and influence are unevenly distributed. Social media companies and economic stakeholders control the design and incentives of platforms, while young users experience the effects with limited ability to change them. Other stakeholders attempt to respond, but their influence is restricted. Addressing this issue requires shifting responsibility toward those who design and control digital platforms, while also increasing awareness among users. As an individual user, I can start addressing this problem by becoming more aware of how social media affects my behavior and setting limits on my usage, such as reducing screen time and avoiding addictive features. In this case, I am part of the young adult stakeholder group, and my actions can help reduce the negative impact on my own well-being. Additionally, I can help by raising awareness among the next generation and encouraging healthier digital habits early on, so they are better prepared to manage these platforms. Without these changes, the current system will continue to influence behavior in ways that may negatively affect young adults' well-being.

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