

social media

Social media is a form of Internet-based communication that became popular in the late 20th and early 21st century. Today billions of people use social media to create, share, and display information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos. They can connect to social media websites or applications using a computer, mobile phone, or tablet. Popular social media platforms include Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube.

People sometimes use the related terms social network and social media interchangeably. However, a social network is an online community, and social networking is the practice of building communities. Social media is more about using social networking sites to build an audience.

Benefits

Many people enjoy using social media. Social media allows users to stay in contact and communicate with family and friends. Users can make new friends and join new groups of like-minded people. Because social media is over the Internet, everyone can be included. For example, people who have disabilities or illnesses that keep them separated from other people and people who live in remote areas are able to participate. This all-inclusive environment can give users a sense of community and the feeling of being connected with others. Such one-on-one and group interactions—which are instantaneous—can improve a person’s emotional and mental well-being. Social connections can help reduce stress and anxiety, increase self-worth, and ward off loneliness.

Social media allows users to express themselves in a public way. Users can reach a wide audience, building up a following of supporters, in a short time. Users can show a creative side through photographs, videos, and postings. They can also raise awareness about worthwhile causes.

Criticism

Many people, from users to experts, point out that social media may negatively affect people, especially preteens and teens. Using social media as a primary means of communication instead of in-person interactions may create a sense of loneliness and isolation. When people feel lonely and isolated they may become depressed or anxious. Cyberbullying can also lead to the same outcomes. Cyberbullying is when a person posts mean-spirited messages about a person on social media, often anonymously.

Social media allows the user to mindlessly sift through posts, images, and videos. For many people the activity is fun and relaxing. However, some people get so caught up in social media that they use it excessively. Some users can become consumed with trying to gain followers—the people who read and watch what they post. Sometimes social media is addictive, interfering with people’s lives. People may ignore face-to-face relationships, work, and other responsibilities in order to use social media.

Privacy and security are important concerns when using social media. Sites collect and store personal data, such as a person’s name, birth date, e-mail address, location, and financial information. This information is often shared with third-party organizations, such as advertisers and service providers. Those companies then tailor advertising campaigns and target certain people for which to offer services. Social media sites and third-party companies are vulnerable to hacking and data breaches. At any point personal information may fall into the hands of disreputable people. Social media users need to be able to trust that the sites provide security to keep all their data safe.

Some social media posts can promote dangerous acts. Several TikTok videos, for example, challenge viewers to complete stunts that can lead to serious injury. Such stunts may involve moving vehicles, boiling water, or electricity. Many of those videos have gone viral, or amassed millions of views in a short period of time. Teens especially are susceptible to peer pressure to participate in dangerous activities.

Another issue concerns the quality of the information that is on social media. Misinformation and disinformation are widespread. Misinformation is incorrect or misleading information. Disinformation is false information that has been deliberately spread to influence public opinion or hide the truth. Many people accept what is written on social media—

or on any website in general—as factual information. However, social media is full of opinions, rumors, gossip, and wrong information.

Some social media critics say that the vast amount of information on social media sites makes finding and deleting misinformation impractical. Others point out that misinformation, especially outrageous news, attracts users. More users means more advertising revenue, so social media sites are reluctant to take down this information. Because of the wide reach of social media, any information—or false information—can spread quickly.

Safety

There are several ways to combat the problems involved with using social media. Experts encourage everyone to limit their time on social media. Social media can consume too much of a person's time, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Relationships outside of those on the Internet are beneficial and need to be nurtured. In-person interactions contribute to the emotional wellness of people. To help with balance, some sites allow users to set timers that alert them when they have been on the site for a specified amount of time.

Once preteens and teens begin to engage on social media sites, experts warn parents to monitor their accounts. Parents can make sure that their children know with whom they are communicating. Discussions about the dangers of conversing with unknown people on social media are important. Parents can also talk with their children about appropriate ways to conduct themselves on social media. Social media sites are available to a wide audience, so people need to think before they post material. They can unintentionally offend or upset someone with their posts. Gossiping, spreading rumors, and bullying can be very harmful. Parents can check that their children are not engaging in such behavior and are not exhibiting signs of stress or anxiety from falling victim to such behavior. Children who are victims or witnesses of cyberbullying may want to seek advice and support from parents or other trusted adults. In addition, critics advise users to remain cautious about participating in challenges or stunts. People should evaluate the challenges for the potential to cause harm and only choose to perform and share safe stunts.

Finally, experts advise that people remain aware that social media spreads misinformation and disinformation. Users should not blindly accept what is posted on social media as fact. When in doubt, users can evaluate the source of the information for trustworthiness. People can check disturbing or incredible news with reputable sources before accepting or sharing the information.

History

The earliest forms of social media began shortly after modern electronic computers appeared. E-mail and chat programs debuted in the early 1970s. USENET, a discussion group network, appeared in 1979. It allowed users to post and receive messages within subject areas called newsgroups. USENET and other discussion forums, such as privately hosted bulletin board systems, enabled individuals to interact to some degree. Technology expanded rapidly, and in 1993 the Mosaic web browser introduced to those systems an easy-to-use graphical interface. Faster Internet connections allowed for more multimedia content than could be found in the text-heavy newsgroups.

The first companies to create social networks on the Internet were Classmates.com and SixDegrees.com. Classmates.com was founded in 1995. It used an aggressive pop-up advertising campaign to draw web users to its site. Classmates.com created a social network for members of high-school and college graduating classes, armed service branches, and workplaces. SixDegrees.com launched in 1997. It was the first true social networking site. SixDegrees.com allowed members to create profiles for themselves, maintain lists of friends, and contact one another through the site's private messaging system. It claimed to have attracted more than three million users by 2000. However, it failed to generate income and collapsed that year.

Nevertheless, other social media sites became popular in the early 21st century. Soon Friendster and MySpace emerged. Both allowed family members, friends, and acquaintances to connect online. Facebook eventually replaced Friendster and MySpace, becoming one of the world's most popular social media sites, with billions of users worldwide. Other forms of social media emerged for the sharing of specific types of content. For example, YouTube allows users to share videos, and TikTok is specifically designed for the sharing of short videos. LinkedIn is a business-networking site, emphasizing a user's professional connections.

In 2019 the contagious illness COVID-19 was first detected, and it spread worldwide in 2020. The large-scale outbreak, or pandemic, infected hundreds of millions of people. Self-imposed and government-ordered restrictions, including the banning of large gatherings, isolated people. As a result, the use of social media increased steeply.

Cite

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

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