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Chapter 18 Social Media

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The social-media landscape changes incredibly fast, so you have to be open-minded and nimble to keep up with it.

—Alexis Ohanian, co-founder of Reddit

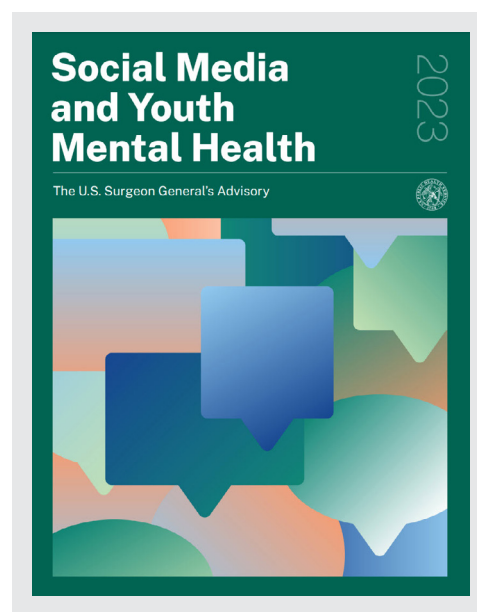
Overview

At the turn of the century, we were still at the beginning of our journey into this always-on, always-connected world. We still wrote physical letters and sent birthday cards by mail. Phone calls were expensive and video calling was like science fiction. Google and Facebook didn't exist.³¹² You couldn't download video games on your mobile phone because you didn't have access to an app store that sold software.

In contrast, just today you might have viewed TikTok videos, checked Instagram, sent a WhatsApp message, liked an author's tweet, and chatted with your friends on Discord. All before starting your school day. You may not realize it, but the smart-phone-always-on-hand lifestyle has turned us into **social media** creatures constantly dropping digital breadcrumbs about our lives on the Internet. Without being aware, you may have shared information about your friends, your boss at work, the books you like, your vacation plans, the products you use at home, and even revealed your eagerness to find a partner. These breadcrumbs help companies show you ads for the things you are most interested in. But they also have a dark side. Social media apps—the consumer-facing applications of the digital world—could potentially hurt your career and relationships. All these possibilities arise from social media apps—the consumer-facing applications of the digital world.

While the benefits of social media are well known, in recent years there is increasing awareness of its potential harms. Several states have passed laws to regulate social media use, and the US Surgeon General has issued an advisory summarizing results from research on social media's impact on mental health. The Surgeon General's advisory informs us on large sections of this chapter and is a great resource to augment the information in this chapter.³¹³ Particularly useful are the links in the advisory to the empirical studies that have looked at the issues we have brought up in this chapter.

Adapting from Carr and Hayes³¹⁴ and the advisory from the Surgeon General, we define social media as *Internet-based channels that allow users to interact and derive value from user-generated content*. The goal of this chapter is to make you



312 Television was the primary information source on 9/11.

313 "Social Media and Youth Mental Health," The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf> (accessed June 2023).

314 Carr, C. T., & Hayes, R. A., "Social Media: Defining, Developing, and Divining," *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 23:1, 46-65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2015.972282> (accessed June 2023).

more aware of the impact of social media, so you can make the best use of social media in your life and career, while avoiding the pitfalls. For both benefits and risks, we look at both professional and personal aspects.

Benefits of Social Media

Professional Benefits

When you want to watch a movie, you may check out movie ratings and user comments on IMDb before choosing a movie to buy. Before you purchase a product on Amazon, you often read reviews posted by previous buyers to confirm the product will work as expected. In college, students often review websites where students post comments about professors before picking classes.

You face similar situations when you enter the workforce. When you are looking for jobs, in many ways it is useful to think of yourself as a product on the market for potential employers to buy. Before people hire you for your next job, they are very likely to explore what others have to say about you in the digital world. They may go to LinkedIn to check if your previous employers and colleagues have great things to say about you. They may even check your social media activities and learn about your family and political inclinations. The stakes are high. Hence, it is important to carefully manage your presence in the digital world, so your digital presence helps you and does not adversely affect your chances of finding a new job or striking new alliances.

One great software tool you can take advantage of is LinkedIn. It was officially launched in 2003³¹⁵ to connect working professionals and now boasts over 930 million members in over 200 countries. Even as a high-school student, you may want to create your LinkedIn profile to list your accomplishments and work experiences and to connect with your classmates, students at other schools you meet at events, teachers, and employers. If you have done a great job as an intern, you may request your boss and your colleagues to leave a review about you on LinkedIn. This will not only help exhibit your experience and interest but also confirm your identity to your potential employers. Before you graduate high school, don't forget to connect with your friends on LinkedIn to start building your professional network and stay connected.

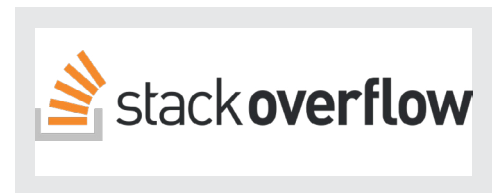


Good reviews and connections on LinkedIn may prove to be more valuable than what you list about yourself on your resume. An important challenge for both fresh graduates and employers is the high uncertainty about the work ethic and professionalism of fresh graduates. Do you show up on time? Are you a team player or do you create disruptions on the team? Do you show initiative, or do you have to be pushed to complete every task? A school or college transcript does not reveal these details. LinkedIn reviews from internship employers or team coaches can help close this gap and be a critical asset as you get started in your career.

315 For a quick history of LinkedIn, please see, "Looking Back at the History of LinkedIn," <https://penningtoncreative.com/history-of-Linkedin>. "The Complete History of LinkedIn: Everything You Need to Know," is a slightly more detailed version, <https://history-computer.com/the-complete-history-of-Linkedin/> (accessed June 2023).

A basic LinkedIn account is free and allows you to send emails to your connections on LinkedIn. To send messages to members you don't know, you need to pay for a premium account. If you are interested in working at a company, you can check on LinkedIn to see if any of your friends are working there and message them politely to make them aware of your interest. If a suitable position opens, your friends may reach out to you and may even connect you with the hiring manager. In fact, if your LinkedIn profile looks strong, a new job is likely to find you rather than the other way around. Recruiters, particularly in fields such as Digital Information Technology, with demand for good talents constantly scour LinkedIn in search of candidates.

Other than LinkedIn, you may also want to establish your presence on sites frequented by other professionals in your field. If you are a programmer, you may want a [GitHub](#) profile³¹⁶ to showcase all the hobby programming work you have done. If you are technically proficient, you could answer questions on StackOverflow and build your online reputation. If you do gig work, sites like Upwork³¹⁷ and Fiverr³¹⁸ can help you create a repertoire of work and reviews.



Personal Benefits

People of all ages use social media for its benefits. The authors of this book stay connected with their friends from high school through social media, decades after graduation. The Surgeon General's advisory identifies several benefits, including a sense of community for people with shared values identities, abilities, and interests. Users get important information quickly and also use social media to express their opinions. Social media helps you sustain friendships online and organize social events easily. By giving you access to a wider community, social media can increase the diversity of your peer groups. If you need social support, social media increases the likelihood that you will find one close to your preferences. Most adolescents report that social media helps them feel more accepted, more supported, more creative, and more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives.

Risks of Social Media

Professional Risks

Unfortunately, the benefits of social media come with several risks that are not present in face-to-face interactions. Comments made during personal interactions stay limited to the memories of those present at the time of the interaction. But comments made on social media are persistent and available for review potentially forever. Many employers don't just look at professional websites like LinkedIn but also do a Google search of your name. Employers, particularly large employers, are

316 You can create a GitHub profile at <https://github.com/> (accessed June 2023).

317 Upwork home page, <https://www.upwork.com/> (accessed June 2023).

318 Fiverr home page, <https://www.fiverr.com/> (accessed June 2023).

very concerned about how their customers feel about them. Anything associated with you on social media that can be interpreted as being disagreeable, such as racist, homophobic, xenophobic, or misogynistic, even statements made as jokes, may come in the way of a great career opportunity. In contrast, a carefully curated online persona can have a positive and meaningful impact on both your career and life. Therefore, be careful before you share information online.

Another risk of social media relates to how you spend your time and attention. How you spend your time during your school years to learn skills relevant to a career can have a disproportionate impact on your professional outcomes. The earlier you enter a career, the longer you can benefit from the income earned from the career. Unfortunately, teenagers are also eager for social validation. They may end up spending their time and attention on trying to look like social-media influencers with excellent physiques. They do this without considering that having a certain body structure may be a job requirement for influencers, but few people can make a living by just relying on their great physique.

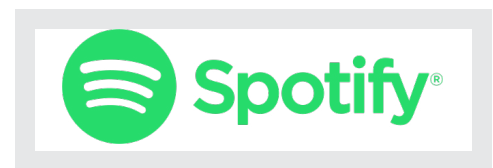
For most people, it would take far greater effort to maintain physique and acquire skills necessary to earn a living as models (social media influencers) than it would take to learn technology for a profitable career. Focusing your attention on learning skills (such as enterprise technologies introduced in this book) that can help you find a good job may be very valuable ultimately compared to maintaining influence on social media. Besides, it becomes increasingly difficult to create novelty and maintain influencer status. But careers in widely relevant skills such as Digital Information Technologies can easily last a lifetime.

Personal Risks

Tracking

Ever wondered how Spotify picks up songs aligned with your taste? How Netflix, YouTube, and TikTok can keep you glued for a long time with their recommendations? How the surprise loot box pops up just when you are about to wrap up video games for the day? How Amazon seems to know what you want to buy, as if it's reading your mind?

When you watch a TikTok video, not only do they know what you watched but also where you placed your finger when watching, how long you watched it, how many times you watched it, and how many similarly themed videos you watched. They know what time of the day you usually watch videos and how much time you spend on every session. They know whether you are stationary or driving when you watch videos. They know what you liked, disliked, followed, or commented on. They know who your friends are and what their viewing preferences are. This enables TikTok to build a profile about you, and it's safe to assume that TikTok knows more about you and your innermost thoughts, likes, and dislikes than your teachers, doctors, parents, friends, and colleagues. TikTok may even know more about you than you might be willing to acknowledge about yourself. This information gives TikTok, and other social media companies who are similarly **tracking** your information, enormous leverage over you.



You should not be surprised to see digital ads follow you around wherever you go on the Internet. Even if your partner searches for a new car on a laptop that is connected to your home router, you may soon begin to see car advertisements. It doesn't take long for a search engine to figure out that two people are closely associated if they use the same home router. If your friend is interested in a car, car companies are willing to spend their dollars to influence you, too.

Even if you use your browser in the incognito mode, all you can hope to achieve is not leave a trace on your computer of your activity. However, the websites you access still know that the request came from your computer. There is always a server log somewhere of your activity; and breadcrumbs have been dropped.

Addiction

Research in this area is nascent but according to the Surgeon General's advisory, it is possible that social media exposure affects the reward center in the brain in ways comparable to **addiction**. There is evidence that frequent and inappropriate social media use may cause brain structures to change in ways similar to people with substance use or gambling addictions.

Not surprisingly, social media companies are able to offer targeted advertisements to keep people glued to their platforms for hours. Teenagers and young adults are particularly susceptible to social media addiction. If you answer "Yes" to any behaviors such as those listed here, you may be suffering from this addiction.³¹⁹

- Do you become restless if you haven't checked your social media accounts in the past few minutes?
- Do you wake up in the middle of the night to see how many people have liked your post?
- Do you stalk people online?
- Do you spend your free time playing video games with strangers?
- Are your closest friends in the online world?
- Are you compelled to send snaps on Snapchat just to have a high Snapstreak count?

Social Media addiction can be as dangerous as Cocaine addiction, since it has the potential to come in the way of your life and career. The algorithms of social media apps are designed to make you feel good by giving you dopamine-induced highs. Snapchat encourages you to check the app constantly, so you don't lose your winning streak. Similarly, Facebook and YouTube can keep you on their platform by dangling content you like. Even LinkedIn sends notifications to entice you to hop on to their platform by notifying you of a colleague's promotion, someone's new job, and the names of people you can connect with to expand your network. However, once you go on LinkedIn, you may end up wasting hours doom-scrolling and checking on ex-colleagues and even people you are not likely to ever meet in your life.

319 There are several scales developed to measure social media addiction, including the Bergen Scale, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29130330/> (accessed June 2023), and the social media addiction scale for adolescents <https://openaccess.marmara.edu.tr/entities/publication/258b3245-75d7-4a95-8f9c-d28a707e6da1> (accessed June 2023). The items presented here are our adaptations of the items in these scales.

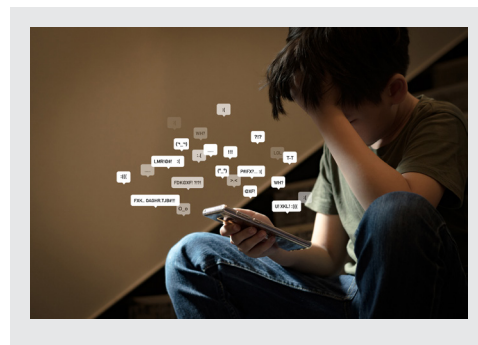
Heavy social media users end up being more isolated from others and are less physically active because they are static in one place with their phones and laptops. Studies have also shown that the indiscriminate use of social media can lead to anxiety, stress, poor work performance, and low self-esteem. Most people project a narrow view of themselves on social media—photos in which they are looking great, receiving an award, or smiling with their happy families. Even folks suffering from deadly, incurable diseases may post glamorous pictures of themselves on social media without offering a hint of the truth. And their friends who are unable to post great pictures may feel miserable in comparison. The pressure to be liked on social media can turn it into a village square where everyone is judged all the time based on the whims and fancies of the most vocal participants. Your online friends usually have no clue of your financial situation; they may have no clue that you are suffering from mental or physical disabilities or going through a breakup, while posting unflattering comments related to you.

The good news is that social media addiction can be cured. While research results are limited at this time, several experts have shared their personal experiences on how they cured their own social media addictions.³²⁰ Setting rules and boundaries is a common theme. Here are a few suggestions based on these experiences:

- Create a social media “happy hour.” Designate a happy hour dedicated to social media and use it for social media engagement but eliminate social media activity outside this window. This limits doom scrolling where you spend hours scrolling through your accounts. For example, you may decide to spend 30 minutes in the evenings or after accomplishing a major task.
- Avoid social media during lonely or low times. The apps are likely to make you feel worse as you will end up comparing yourself to others. Instead, find ways to create in-person interactions by visiting a library to borrow books or engage in other activities—e.g., yoga studio, cycling, dancing, or other team sports.
- Disable notifications. Most social media apps hook you by notifying you of some event that promises excitement. This interferes with any serious activity. If you get notified of your friends’ dating adventures every five minutes, you are not likely to focus on your upcoming exams. Focus on what is in your best interests, not on what is in the social media companies’ best interests.
- Practice technology hygiene. Keep laptops and phones way from your bedroom at night to avoid disrupting your sleep.
- Visit friends and family when you want company.

Cyberbullying

The mobile Internet connected us to people, but it also connected us to their darker sides. **Cyberbullying** is a pattern of threatening, mocking, or demeaning posts about someone on social media



320 For example, a Harvard Business Review blog article, “I Ran 4 Experiments to Break My Social Media Addiction. Here’s What Worked.” describes the experiences of Sarah Peck, an entrepreneur in NYC, <https://hbr.org/2018/10/i-ran-4-experiments-to-break-my-social-media-addiction-heres-what-worked> (accessed June 2023).

apps or messaging platforms. Once limited to physical interactions, bullying can now easily become a pervasive and permanent feature of our life, following us wherever we go. It is no longer confined to school playgrounds and toxic family gatherings.

Adolescents often minimize sharing their social media experiences with their loved ones, so it is possible for them to bully or get bullied without others finding out about it. Sometimes, it may not be clear if the jokes about you are unintentional, harmless, or a form of cyberbullying. However, if something happens repeatedly and ends up hurting you emotionally, then it is cyberbullying. Here are a few forms of cyberbullying, according to UNICEF:³²¹

- spreading lies about or posting embarrassing photos or videos of someone on social media;
- sending hurtful, abusive, or threatening messages, images, or videos via messaging platforms;
- impersonating someone and sending mean messages to others on their behalf or through fake accounts.

If you are experiencing cyberbullying, please act immediately to avoid impacting your physical and mental health. Here are a few options to consider:

- hide or delete offensive posts;
- bring the cyberbullying to the attention of a trusted adult;
- unfriend or block bullies;
- alert your school counselors since they deal with cyberbullies regularly;
- delete the social media app where you are being bullied until the issue is addressed (This may be a temporary measure since you are likely to depend upon social media apps and messaging platforms as a source of information and a networking tool.);
- contact the help center of the social media app or the messaging platform where you are being bullied. (Social media companies are far more aware of cyberbullying now than they were a decade ago and are constantly developing new technology and offering help to thwart cyberbullying. The UNICEF website to stop cyberbullying lists the help centers of social media apps at the bottom of the page.³²²)

Online Predators

Parents strongly discourage their children from getting close to strangers, but often give children access to the Internet, where strangers can contact them, talk to them, and share inappropriate content with them. Someone pretending to be a sixteen-year-old girl may be a fifty-year-old man convicted of pedophilia. Unfortunately, the Internet offers anonymity, which can be a blessing as well as a curse. Online predators hang around in social media sites that are popular with children, pose as

321 “Cyberbullying: What is it and how to stop it,” <https://www.unicef.org/end-violence/how-to-stop-cyberbullying> (accessed June 2023).

322 “Cyberbullying: What is it and how to stop it,” <https://www.unicef.org/end-violence/how-to-stop-cyberbullying> (accessed June 2023).

children to befriend them, and gain their trust over time before trying to take advantage of them in inappropriate ways. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- never give your contact information (e.g., address or phone number) to people you meet online;
- never arrange to physically meet a person you have only met online;
- never share a picture or a video of yourself that has the potential to embarrass you publicly or to blackmail you;
- beware if someone uses excessive flattery;
- immediately alert trusted adults/school counselors/police if someone shares inappropriate content.

Online Scammers

In the physical world, we can avoid pickpockets and scammers by avoiding busy places and refusing to talk to strangers. However, in the online world, we could be in the comfort of our homes and be scammed by a sweettalking conman sitting thousands of miles away in another country.

By posting your real birthday on Facebook, you give away an important bit of personal information about yourself. If you click on an email from an organization that you don't completely trust, you may end up installing malware on your computer. If you follow the directions to update your credit card information sent in an email, scammers may end up withdrawing money from your account. If you tell people on Facebook that you are vacationing in Hawaii, then you may end up revealing to potential thieves that you are not at home. There are many types of scams going on in the online world, including job offer scams, lottery scams, hitman scams, romance scams, disaster relief scams, grandparent scams, and others. Scammers can pose as FBI agents, bank officials, IRS agents, or sheriffs. Sometimes, groups of individuals come together to scam and may play different roles to make it appear legitimate. With time, scammers are becoming so good at their jobs that it may be practically impossible to tell fake from real. So, what can you do to protect yourself? Here are a few tips:



- Be wary of revealing personal information. A favorite trick of scammers is to ask you for credentials to help fix a problem in your account. This is so common that being solicited for credentials is now a known security risk. Almost no legitimate service provider will ever solicit you for credentials or contact information. If there is a problem with your account, you will know it from your account page at the service provider's website. If you are threatened with disruption of service, call the help desk number of the service provider directly. It is almost never appropriate to share your SSN, driver's license, or other information in response to a cold outreach.
- Look for "https://" at the beginning of the URL, which indicates a secure connection. Additionally, check for a padlock symbol in the browser's address bar. People eager to secure U.S. visas are regularly scammed by look-alike websites.

- Automate updates on your machines so you always have the most current security updates.
- Use strong passwords and update them regularly.
- Don't click or hover on links in unsolicited emails or texts to avoid installing malware on your computer.
- Report scams to your local law enforcement agencies or to the appropriate platforms. This may mobilize action to end the scam and reduce the chances that others fall victim to it. You may also file a complaint with the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) of the FBI.³²³

In general, be skeptical of unsolicited communication asking for your financial or personal information. If some offer looks too good to be true, then it probably is. You can get more information about the current recommendations to defend against scammers by visiting the Federal Trade Commission's website on scam defense.³²⁴

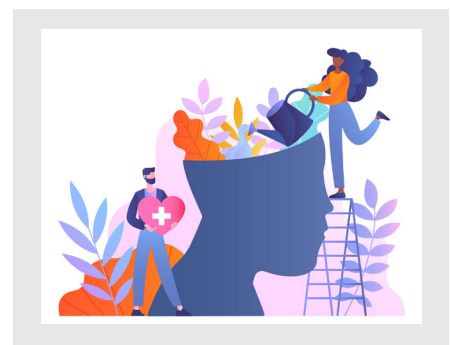
Echo Chambers or Confirming Your Biases

As human beings, we tend to seek information that reinforces our preexisting beliefs. **Echo chambers** refer to groups that promote information that fits their conclusions and ignore information that does not. If you spend time on social media apps, you are likely to gravitate towards information that you agree with. Social media algorithms will then flood you with similar information to keep you engaged. If you are not careful, social media apps can then become echo chambers and confirm and solidify your biases. Unfortunately, this can prevent you from learning counterpoints to your opinions. Potentially, you may accept untrue information that reinforces your opinions. The Internet is full of fringe groups spouting fake news and rumors. Over time, this leads people to move further away from the truth and reluctant to listen to opposing viewpoints. Social scientists believe that social media apps have contributed to the polarization we see in our world.

To avoid getting into this trap, try to consciously reach out to people and groups with opposing opinions and try to understand what might be behind their opinions. It is generally not useful to label those who disagree with you in adversarial terms.

Mental Health

The Surgeon General's advisory identifies several mental health concerns associated with social media use. Spending significant time on social media (three hours per day or more) greatly increased the risk of anxiety and depression among adolescents. Social media use increased depression even among college students. Evidence suggests that these concerns are greater for girls. Specific health concerns linked to social media use include cyberbullying-related depression, body image and disordered eating behaviors, and poor sleep quality.



323 Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3), FBI, <https://www.ic3.gov/> (accessed June 2023).

324 "Avoiding and Reporting Scams," FTC, <https://consumer.ftc.gov/scams> (accessed June 2023).

Conclusion

Although social media apps connect us to each other and give us unlimited access to information, they also have the potential to isolate and divide us. It is important to carefully monitor what we say or do on social media apps to not just avoid scammers, bullies, and predators but also to build a good online reputation. Assume that anything you say or do on social media will be used against you at the most critical time in your life. Just the way a potential employer may ask you to do a drug test before hiring you, employers may also ask for your social media handles to review your online reputation.

As the Surgeon General's advisory states, social media platforms are designed for adults, but used extensively by adolescents, placing adolescents at high risk of harm. By the time we understand how social media affect our youth, the current generation of youth may experience long-lasting harm. Many of the concerns associated with social media may eventually be addressed by regulation, but until then, it has become the responsibility of children, adolescents, parents, and teachers to minimize harm from inappropriate social media use.



Chapter Terms and Definitions

Social Media: Internet-based channels that allow users to interact and derive value from user-generated content

LinkedIn: A global social network designed to connect working professionals

GitHub: A complete developer platform with communities across the world collaborating on software development

Cyberbullying: A pattern of threatening, mocking, or demeaning posts about someone on social media apps or messaging platforms

Echo Chambers: Groups that promote information that fits their conclusions and ignore information that does not

Social Media Tracking: The process of collecting social media data and saving it into a data store for analysis and use in algorithms

Social Media Addiction: Social media exposure that affects the reward center in the brain in ways comparable to addiction



Chapter Case

Ken's Social Media Safety Research

Ken just finished taking a class on Internet safety. He knew that social media was a place where lots of good and bad things can happen. Ken wanted to know more about social media and what their companies can do to protect the safety of their users. He remembered that when he joined several social media platforms, he would just ignore the terms of use. At that time, he just wanted to start using the social media platform and socialize with his friends. But now, he was concerned about safety and researched the terms of use for three popular social media platforms. Here is a sample of what Ken found from Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter:

Instagram: Maintain our supportive environment by not glorifying self-injury.

The Instagram community cares for each other, and is often a place where people facing difficult issues such as eating disorders, cutting, or other kinds of self-injury come together to create awareness or find support. We try to do our part by providing education in the app and adding information in the Help Center so people can get the help they need.

Encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury is counter to this environment of support, and we'll remove it or disable accounts if it's reported to us. We may also remove content identifying victims or survivors of self-injury if the content targets them for attack or humor.

Snapchat: Rights You Grant Us

Many of our Services let you create, upload, post, send, receive, and store content. When you do that, you retain whatever ownership rights in that content you had to begin with. But you grant us a license to use that content. How broad that license is depends on which Services you use and the Settings you have selected.

For all content you submit to the Services, you grant Snap and our affiliates a worldwide, royalty-free, sublicensable, and transferable license to host, store, cache, use, display, reproduce, modify, adapt, edit, publish, analyze, transmit, and distribute that content. This license is for the purpose of operating, developing, providing, promoting, and improving the Services and researching and developing new ones. This license includes a right for us to make your content available to, and pass these rights along to, service providers with whom we have contractual relationships related to the provision of the Services, solely for the purpose of providing such Services.



Chapter Case (continued)

Twitter: Targeted harassment

We consider targeted behavior as malicious, unreciprocated, and intended to humiliate or degrade an individual(s). We prohibit the following behavior on the platform:

- Posting multiple Tweets, over a short period of time, or continuously posting replies with malicious content, to target an individual. This includes accounts dedicated to harassing an individual or multiple individuals.
- Mentioning or tagging users with malicious content.

.....

Question 1: Review the terms of use samples from the three social media platforms listed above. Choose one and describe in your own words why you think the platform has listed this term of use and how it can keep its users safe.

Question 2: Think of a feature you could add to any social media platform of your choice that would help keep people safe. Describe the feature in detail and how you think it will keep the platform's users safe.