



## **The Dark Side of the Moon: How Social Media Platform Design Reshapes Social Life, Family Stability, and Student Success**

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### **Abstract**

Social media platforms have become deeply embedded in everyday social, relational, and educational practices, shaping how individuals communicate, allocate attention, evaluate themselves, and manage their personal and academic lives. Although these platforms are widely praised for facilitating connection, community, and access to information, an expanding body of research indicates that they may also generate unintended negative consequences for social life. This conceptual integrative review synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature on the darker social implications of social media use across three interrelated domains: everyday social life, family stability and romantic relationships, and student success. Drawing on displacement and opportunity-cost perspectives, social comparison theory, interpersonal electronic surveillance, technofence, and self-regulation frameworks, the paper explains how specific platform affordances, algorithmic content curation, social feedback metrics, persistent connectivity, and frictionless monitoring can amplify psychological mechanisms such as envy, jealousy, attention fragmentation, and compulsive use. Evidence suggests that passive and comparison-heavy use is associated with reduced well-being; surveillance-oriented use is linked to relational conflict and reduced relationship satisfaction; and heavy or problematic use is modestly but reliably associated with lower academic achievement. By integrating findings that are often examined in isolation, the review proposes a unified conceptual framework connecting platform design features to psychological mechanisms and downstream social and educational outcomes. Practical implications are presented for families, educators, and policymakers, emphasizing boundary-setting, attention-aware digital literacy, and interventions that strengthen self-regulation and reduce device-mediated interruptions.

**Keywords:** social media, social life, family stability, romantic relationships, technofence, academic performance, self-regulation, social comparison

### **1. Introduction**

Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, X) have evolved from optional communication channels into pervasive digital environments that shape how individuals allocate attention, evaluate themselves, maintain relationships, and participate in learning. These platforms are deliberately designed to sustain engagement through algorithmic news feeds, social feedback metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, and continuous streams of personalized content. As a consequence, social media now mediates a wide range of everyday interactions, from friendship maintenance and romantic communication to family routines and academic coordination.

Early scholarship on social media often emphasized its potential benefits, including enhanced opportunities for social connection, self-expression, and access to information. At the same time, a growing body of research documents a parallel “dark side” characterized by declines in subjective well-being, relational strain, and difficulties with attention and learning. Importantly, most available evidence is correlational. Social media



use does not directly or uniformly “cause” divorce, loneliness, or academic failure, and individuals experiencing distress or dissatisfaction may also turn to social media as a coping strategy or form of escape. Nevertheless, consistent empirical patterns indicate that when social media becomes intrusive, comparison-heavy, surveillance-oriented, or compulsive, it is reliably associated with outcomes that undermine the quality of social life.

A central contribution of this paper is its effort to integrate research across three domains that are frequently examined in isolation: (a) everyday social life, (b) family stability and romantic relationships, and (c) student success. These domains are deeply interconnected. Emotional well-being shapes relationship quality; relationship conflict disrupts sleep, attention, and academic functioning; and academic stress can intensify online coping behaviors. An integrated conceptual review is therefore necessary to clarify shared mechanisms and to develop more coherent guidance for families, educators, and policymakers.

Accordingly, this paper proposes an integrative conceptual framework that links platform design features to psychological and behavioral mechanisms, such as social comparison, envy, jealousy, technofence, and self-regulation failure, and then to downstream outcomes, including reduced well-being, relational strain, and lower academic performance. In doing so, the paper seeks to support research, educational practice, and policy initiatives aimed at promoting healthier digital environments without resorting to simplistic or moralizing claims.

## **2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations**

### **2.1 Displacement and opportunity-cost perspectives**

A foundational mechanism in media effects research is displacement: time devoted to one activity necessarily reduces the time available for others. In social media contexts, displacement involves not only time but also attention and psychological presence. Even brief checks and notifications can interrupt conversations, shared routines, and deep work. From an opportunity-cost perspective, social media may gradually erode high-value activities that require sustained engagement, such as extended conversations with family members, shared leisure experiences, or focused academic study, by encouraging frequent attention switching. This mechanism is particularly relevant for family stability and student success, where relational responsiveness and sustained attention are essential.

### **2.2 Social comparison theory and self-evaluative processes**

Social comparison theory proposes that individuals evaluate their abilities and life circumstances by comparing themselves with others (Festinger, 1954). Social media intensifies these processes because users typically present curated highlights rather than ordinary experiences. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that exposure to idealized portrayals on social media is associated with lower self-esteem through heightened social comparison. For example, Vogel et al. (2014) found that greater Facebook use was associated with lower self-esteem and that social comparison processes mediated this relationship.

Envy represents a particularly important mechanism linking passive consumption to reduced life satisfaction. Krasnova et al. (2013) describe how envy can emerge from repeated exposure to others’ highlight reels, shaping emotional responses and evaluations of one’s own life. These comparison-driven effects are consequential because they influence subsequent social behavior, including withdrawal, irritability, and reassurance-seeking, which in turn affect friendships, family dynamics, and motivation to engage in learning.

### **2.3 Interpersonal electronic surveillance and jealousy**

Tokunaga (2011) introduced the concept of interpersonal electronic surveillance to describe how social networking platforms enable monitoring of romantic partners. Platform features such as “seen” indicators, visible likes, public networks, and online status cues reduce the



cost of surveillance while generating ambiguous signals that may provoke jealousy. Surveillance and jealousy can create reinforcing conflict cycles: monitoring increases suspicion, suspicion increases checking, and checking increases conflict and dissatisfaction. Empirical evidence supports this pathway. González-Rivera et al. (2019) report that conflict over Facebook use is linked to jealousy and surveillance behaviors, which in turn predict lower relationship satisfaction.

#### **2.4 Technoference and partner phubbing**

Beyond surveillance, a critical relational mechanism is technoference, technology-based interruptions in everyday interactions. "Partner phubbing" (phone snubbing) represents one of the most visible forms of technoference in couples. Meta-analytic and empirical evidence indicates that partner phubbing is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and increased conflict, suggesting that it functions as a meaningful relational signal rather than a trivial habit (Roberts & David, 2016; subsequent meta-analytic syntheses).

#### **2.5 Self-regulation failure and problematic social media use**

A growing consensus suggests that many social harms are better explained by problematic social media use than by overall use frequency. Problematic use involves preoccupation, diminished control, and continued use despite negative consequences. Self-regulation theory offers a compelling explanation for these patterns: individuals with lower self-control may be more vulnerable to compulsive checking and multitasking, which undermine relationships and learning. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that self-control is strongly associated with problematic social media use (Simsir-Gokalp & Akyurek, 2024). This perspective aligns with concerns that platform design features, such as variable rewards, infinite scrolling, and social feedback metrics, exploit attentional vulnerabilities.

### **3. Social Media and Everyday Social Life**

#### **3.1 Active versus passive use**

Not all social media use is equivalent. A critical distinction exists between active use (messaging, commenting, meaningful interaction) and passive use (scrolling and lurking). Evidence consistently suggests that passive use is more strongly associated with reduced well-being. Verduyn et al. (2015) provide experimental and longitudinal evidence demonstrating that passive Facebook use undermines affective well-being, whereas active use may be neutral or sometimes beneficial depending on context and relationship quality.

This distinction is important because emotional well-being shapes social behavior. Lower mood and self-esteem may reduce social initiative, increase irritability, and heighten sensitivity to rejection. In turn, these shifts may make offline social interactions less satisfying and increase reliance on online engagement as a coping mechanism.

#### **3.2 Social comparison spirals and emotional consequences**

Repeated exposure to idealized content can produce persistent cycles of comparison and envy. Vogel et al. (2014) show that social comparison processes are linked to lower self-esteem among heavier users, while Krasnova et al. (2013) describe envy as a pathway from social media exposure to reduced life satisfaction. Together, these findings support a plausible comparison spiral: passive browsing increases comparison; comparison increases envy and dissatisfaction; dissatisfaction motivates further browsing or reassurance-seeking; and the cycle continues.

#### **3.3 Social connectedness and loneliness: conditional effects**

The relationship between social media and social connectedness is complex and context-dependent. Active, meaningful interaction may support connection, particularly for individuals with limited offline opportunities. In contrast, comparison-heavy passive use is more likely to increase feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Importantly, this review does not portray social media as uniformly harmful; rather, it highlights conditions under which negative outcomes are more likely to emerge.



## **4. Family Stability and Romantic Relationships**

### **4.1 Associations with marital well-being and divorce-related outcomes**

Concerns about social media's impact on family stability have intensified in recent years. Valenzuela et al. (2014) provide survey and state-level evidence linking social networking site use with lower marital well-being and increased relationship trouble and thoughts about divorce. Although correlational and context-specific, these findings suggest that social media is meaningfully intertwined with marital functioning.

### **4.2 Jealousy, surveillance, and conflict pathways**

Tokunaga's (2011) surveillance framework explains how social media affordances enable monitoring that destabilizes trust. González-Rivera et al. (2019) further document how conflict over Facebook use relates to jealousy and surveillance behaviors, which in turn predict lower relationship satisfaction. These mechanisms help explain why some couples experience social media as a relational stressor: ambiguous cues such as likes, follows, and online presence invite interpretation and misinterpretation.

### **4.3 Boundary erosion and infidelity-related behaviors**

Social media can blur boundaries between partners and potential alternatives. Private messaging, reconnection with former partners, and constant visibility of alternative options may increase relational vulnerability even in the absence of offline infidelity. McDaniel et al. (2017) demonstrate that infidelity-related behaviors on social media are associated with marital dissatisfaction, highlighting how online interactions can affect trust and perceived commitment.

### **4.4 Technoference, partner phubbing, and emotional neglect**

In everyday life, relationship quality depends on responsiveness and shared attention. Technoference, particularly partner phubbing, signals low availability and can be interpreted as disinterest or disrespect. Roberts and David (2016) found that partner phubbing predicted relationship conflict and lower satisfaction through depressive symptoms, underscoring the emotional consequences of device-mediated interruptions.

### **4.5 Why family stability belongs in the same model**

Family stability encompasses not only marital status but also daily relational processes such as communication quality, shared routines, and emotional safety. Social media can intrude into these processes through surveillance, comparison, and interruptions. Even small reductions in quality time may accumulate over months and years into meaningful relational strain.

## **5. Student Success and Academic Performance**

### **5.1 Meta-analytic evidence: social networking sites and academic outcomes**

Concerns about academic consequences are supported by large-scale evidence. Liu et al. (2017) report a significant negative association between social networking site use and academic performance among adolescents and young adults. Although effect sizes are typically modest, their consistency across studies suggests a reliable relationship.

### **5.2 Attention fragmentation, multitasking, and deep learning**

A central explanation involves attention fragmentation. Social media encourages rapid switching between content streams, and notifications prompt frequent checking. Educational psychology emphasizes that sustained attention is critical for comprehension and memory consolidation. Frequent multitasking increases cognitive load and reduces deep processing, even when students perceive themselves as productive.

### **5.3 Procrastination and self-regulation as central mediators**

Academic success depends heavily on self-regulation. Problematic social media use undermines planning, persistence, and distraction control. Meta-analytic evidence

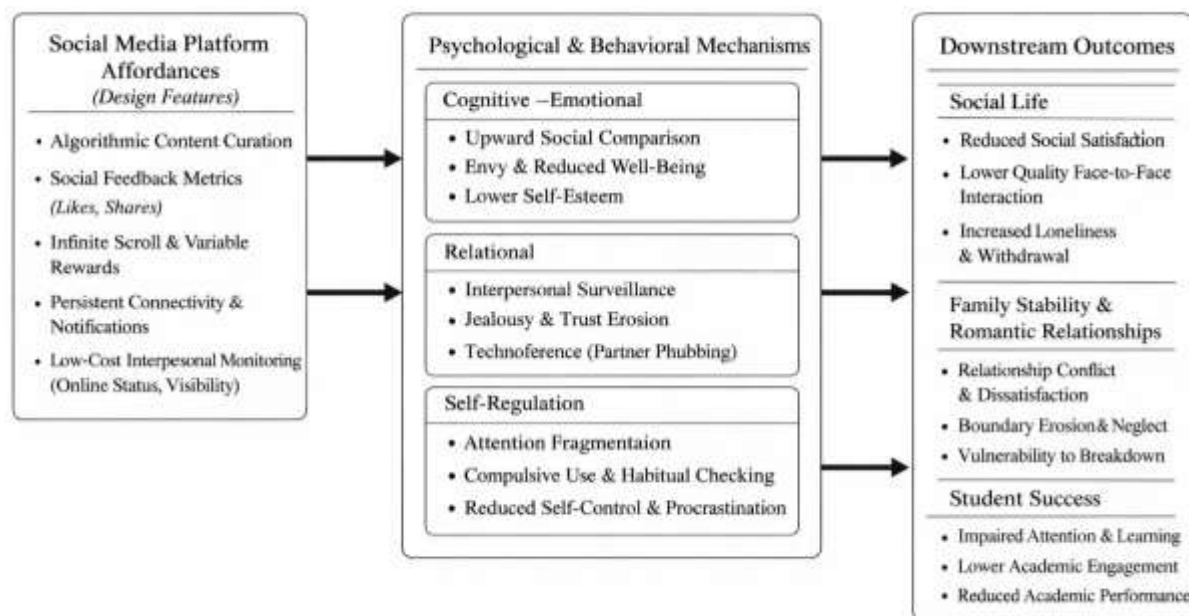
underscores the role of self-control in problematic use (Simsir-Gokalp & Akyurek, 2024), suggesting pathways from low self-control to procrastination and lower performance.

#### 5.4 Emotional and relational spillover into academic life

Social media influences students not only through time use but also through mood and relational stress. Comparison and envy reduce self-esteem; conflict increases stress; technoferece disrupts sleep and routines. These processes illustrate why student success is linked to broader social and family contexts.

### 6. An Integrative Conceptual Framework

The integrative framework proposed here connects platform affordances to psychological mechanisms and downstream outcomes across domains.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework illustrating how social media platform affordances activate psychological and behavioral mechanisms that, in turn, influence social life, family stability, and student success.

Figure 1 summarizes the integrative framework proposed in this review, illustrating how specific social media platform affordances activate cognitive, relational, and self-regulatory mechanisms that contribute to downstream social and educational outcomes.

#### 6.1 Platform affordances

Key affordances include algorithmic feeds, social feedback metrics, persistent connectivity, frictionless monitoring, and infinite scroll.

#### 6.2 Mechanisms

These affordances activate mechanisms including social comparison and envy (Vogel et al., 2014; Krasnova et al., 2013), passive consumption effects (Verduyn et al., 2015), surveillance and jealousy (Tokunaga, 2011; González-Rivera et al., 2019), technoferece (Roberts & David, 2016), and self-regulation failure (Simsir-Gokalp & Akyurek, 2024).

#### 6.3 Outcomes

Downstream outcomes include reduced social well-being, relational dissatisfaction, and lower academic engagement and performance (Liu et al., 2017). The framework highlights risk pathways rather than uniform harm.



## **7. Practical Implications**

### **7.1 For couples and families**

1. Device-free routines: establish phone-free meals, bedtime windows, and shared activities to protect quality time.
2. Transparency and boundaries: discuss acceptable online behaviors (messaging, contact with ex-partners) and avoid surveillance cycles.
3. Address phubbing explicitly: treat phone snubbing as a relationship behavior that affects responsiveness and emotional safety (Roberts & David, 2016).
4. Replace surveillance with communication: encourage direct conversation rather than interpreting ambiguous online cues.

### **7.2 For educators and universities**

1. Attention literacy: teach students how algorithmic feeds and notifications shape behavior and attention.
2. Self-regulation interventions: integrate planning, goal-setting, and distraction-management strategies; focus on habits rather than blame.
3. Supportive classroom policies: implement clear phone/notification norms while providing flexibility for legitimate learning uses.
4. Promote active, purposeful use: encourage social media as a tool for collaboration and learning rather than constant background consumption.

### **7.3 For policymakers and designers**

1. Design for disengagement: encourage features that reduce compulsive checking (notification batching, time reminders, friction for infinite scrolling).
2. Transparency: increase user awareness of algorithmic curation and social metrics.
3. Digital well-being by default: support evidence-informed platform design that protects attention and social functioning.

## **8. Limitations and Future Research**

This review is conceptual and relies on existing literature that is often correlational. Stronger causal inference requires longitudinal designs, experimental studies, and intervention trials. Cross-cultural research is also needed because marriage norms, privacy expectations, and educational practices vary widely. Future studies should examine moderators such as attachment style, social comparison orientation, and self-control. Moreover, research should move beyond broad “screen time” measures and focus on specific behaviors (passive browsing, partner surveillance, phubbing, multitasking during study) and platform affordances (algorithmic content, notifications, social metrics).

Intervention research is particularly important. Testing strategies such as device-free rituals in families, classroom attention training, and app design changes would move the field from description to solutions.

## **9. Conclusion**

Social media is not inherently harmful, but it is not neutral. Its design features can amplify social comparison, envy, surveillance, technoference, and self-regulation failures, mechanisms that undermine social life, family stability, and student success. Evidence suggests passive and comparison-heavy use is associated with reduced well-being; surveillance-oriented and interruption-driven use is linked to relational conflict and reduced satisfaction; and heavy or problematic use is modestly but reliably associated with lower academic performance. By integrating these findings, this review provides a coherent framework explaining why diverse social costs may co-occur and offers practical directions for families, educators, and policymakers.

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