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Social Media Survey – Social and Political Impacts

Summary: Researchers at the University of South Florida, in partnership with the Florida Center for Cybersecurity, conducted a nationwide survey of 1,000 U.S. adults to better understand patterns of social media usage, including the management of online privacy and security, as well as the effects of social media usage on social and mental well-being. This report summarizes common uses of social media – including e-commerce and political engagement – as well as some effects of social media usage on social and mental well-being. The survey included a representative sample of 1,000 adult social media users, fielded between November 2nd and 8th of 2021. Topline results are reported below with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error +/- 3.

Social media is increasingly used for e-commerce. Over half of Americans (54%) report having clicked on a link to an advertisement in their “feed” during the past month, and nearly half (47%) report having shopped for a product or service on social media in same time period.

Americans have relied heavily on social media to stay connected during the pandemic. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) say that they have “relied on social media to stay connected with friends and family during the COVID-19 pandemic”. A similar majority (63%) say that they’ve used social media more frequently during the pandemic, while nearly half (49%) say that social media has been good for their mental health during this time.

Most adult social media users pay close attention to the amount of time they spend on social media: Nearly six-in-ten (59%) Americans say that they spend four or more hours on social media each week, but over half of the survey respondents (53%) say that they closely monitor the amount of time they spend on social media sites.

Most Americans say that keeping up with social media can be stressful: Over half of the survey respondents (57%) report that “keeping up with social media” can be stressful. However, nearly three quarters (74%) say that they don’t feel pressured to post interesting content on their own accounts.

Facebook users say that they encounter diverse points of view on the platform. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center, Facebook remains the most widely used social networking platform in the United States, and users increasingly rely on the platform for political news and information. Despite concerns that social media may limit exposure to alternative viewpoints, our results show that nearly eight-in-ten Facebook users (79%) feel that they often encounter political views on the platform that are different than their own.

Despite relying on social media for news and information, most Americans don't trust the information they encounter there. While over half of the survey respondents (58%) say that they rely on Facebook at least a little to stay informed about news and politics, three quarters (75%) are not confident in the accuracy of the political information that they encounter on the platform.

Most Americans also say that they don't trust social media companies when it comes to keeping their personal information secure. A majority of Americans (62%) say that they are either not very confident or not at all confident in the ability of social media companies (such as Facebook and Twitter) to keep their personal information secure.

Political incivility and misinformation lead to unfriending on Facebook. Nearly a quarter of respondents (24%) report having "unfriended" or "unfollowed" someone on Facebook due to their political posts. The most commonly unfriended accounts are "acquaintances" (17%) and "strangers" (9%). When asked to cite their reasons for "unfriending", respondents emphasized political posts that they found morally objectional (18%) or untruthful (18%).

Despite concerns over the security of their personal information, many social media users continue to engage in risky online behaviors. Just under a third of respondents (29%) report having held an ongoing conversation with a stranger on social media over the past 30 days. During the same time period, roughly a quarter also report having engaged in behaviors that could inadvertently share the information in their user profiles, such as completing surveys (23%) and quizzes/games (28%) that appear in their "feeds".

Teenagers aren't the only ones whose "body image" and self-esteem are negatively affected by social media: Nearly one-third of respondents (32%) reported sometimes feeling bad about the way they look when they see what others post on social media. Female respondents were slightly more likely than male respondents to agree (36% compared to 27%).

Summary of Responses

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: (reported as percentages)

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I pay close attention to the amount of time I spend on social media.	16.4	37.1	29.6	16.9
I pay close attention to the number of likes, retweets, and/or comments that I receive on social media.	14.2	30.6	27.7	27.5
I sometimes feel pressure to post interesting content on social media.	7.2	19.0	26.1	47.7
In general, I think that what people post on social media is an accurate portrayal of their real lives.	6.8	30.2	38.1	24.9
Sometimes I feel that keeping up with social media can be stressful.	20.8	36.5	22.3	20.4
Sometimes I feel like I'm missing out when I see what others post on social media.	9.9	28.8	31.0	30.3
Sometimes I feel bad about the way I look when I see what others post on social media.	9.1	23.1	29.1	38.7

N = 1,000

In an average week, how many hours do you spend on social media?

	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1 hour	153	15.3
1-3 hours	261	26.1
4-6 hours	278	27.8
7-9 hours	129	12.9
10 or more hours	179	17.9

N = 1,000

Have you done each of the following on social media in the past month? (Reported as frequency/percent who answered “yes”)

	Frequency	Percent
Shared photos of yourself	475	47.5
Shared photos of your children/grandchildren	311	31.1
Shared updates on the routine details of your day	299	29.9
Started or held an ongoing conversation with someone you don’t know	291	29.1
Shared content created by someone you don’t know	477	47.7
Completed a survey that appeared in your “feed”	235	23.5
Completed a quiz or played a game that appeared in your “feed”	281	28.1
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<i>N = 1,000</i>		

Have you done each of the following on social media in the past month? (Reported as frequency/percent who answered “yes”)

	Frequency	Percent
Clicked on a link to an advertisement in a post	540	54.0
Shared information about a product, sale, or company	287	28.7
Shopped for a product or service	473	47.3
Advertised or sold an item	153	15.3
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<i>N = 1,000</i>		

Have you done each of the following on social media in the past month? (Reported as frequency/percent who answered “yes”)

	Frequency	Percent
Shared a link to a news story, article, etc.	495	49.5
Posted your opinion on current events	418	41.8
Debated politics or current events with someone in your social network	214	21.4

N = 1,000

How much do you rely on Facebook to stay informed about news and politics?

	Frequency	Percent
A Great Deal	64	7.5
A Lot	99	11.6
A Little	329	38.5
Not at All	362	42.4

N = 854 (Facebook users only)

How confident are you in the accuracy of the political information that you encounter on Facebook?

	Frequency	Percent
Very Confident	44	5.2
Somewhat Confident	173	20.3
Not Very Confident	328	38.4
Not at All Confident	309	36.2

N = 854 (Facebook users only)

In the past 6 months, have you “unfriended” or “unfollowed” someone on Facebook because of their political posts?

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	204	23.9
No	650	76.1

N = 854 (Facebook users only)

For which of the following reasons have you “unfriended” or “unfollowed” someone in the past 6 months? (Reported as frequency/percent who answered “yes”)

	Frequency	Percent
Posting political content that I disagree with.	118	13.8
Posting political ideas that I find morally objectionable	155	18.1
Posting political content that was untrue	154	18.0
Posting about politics too often	129	15.1

N = 854 (Facebook users only)

Which types of accounts/users have you “unfriended” or “unfollowed” because of their political posts in the past 6 months? (Reported as frequency/percent who answered “yes”)

	Frequency	Percent
Acquaintances	143	16.7
Strangers	79	9.3
Close Friends	74	8.7
Members of Your Family	54	6.3
Political Commentators	45	5.3
Elected Officials	43	5.0
News Organizations/Journalists	42	4.9

N = 854 (Facebook users only)

*Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: **I often encounter political views on Facebook that are different than my own.***

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	309	36.2
Somewhat Agree	362	42.4
Somewhat Disagree	125	14.6
Strongly Disagree	58	6.8

N = 854 (Facebook users only)

How confident are you in the ability of social media companies like Facebook and Twitter to keep your personal information secure?

	Frequency	Percent
Very Confident	79	7.9
Somewhat Confident	302	30.2
Not Very Confident	382	38.2
Not at All confident	237	23.7

N = 1,000

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements: (reported as percentages)

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have relied on social media to stay connected with friends and family.	30.0	38.5	16.9	14.6
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have used social media more frequently than before.	29.1	34.0	22.9	14.0
During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has been good for my mental health.	12.5	36.9	31.0	19.6

N = 1,000

Survey Information

1,000 adult social media users were surveyed via an online web-panel using Prodege MR, an industry leading market research provider. The survey was fielded from November 2nd through 8th, and the results are reported with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of +/- 3.

Respondents were selected via a stratified, quota sampling approach to ensure a representative sample of Americans. Balanced quotas for gender, age, race, ethnicity, education, and political affiliation were determined based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 *American Community Survey* (ACS). The quotas were stratified by census region to ensure geographical representativeness: [Northeast – 17.1%; Midwest – 21.3%; South – 38.1%; West – 23.5%].

**Table A1
Sample Comparison**

	USF Survey Sample	American Community Survey (2019)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	51.0 %	51.1 %
Male	48.6 %	48.9 %
Other/Non-Binary	0.4 %	-
<i>Age</i>		
18-24	10.6 %	11.9 %
25-34	17.9 %	17.8 %
35-44	16.4 %	16.5 %
45-54	16.3 %	16.0 %
55-64	17.6 %	16.6 %
65+	21.2 %	21.2 %
<i>Race</i>		
Black/African American	15.1 %	15.1 %
White/Caucasian	73.9 %	76.4 %
Asian/Pacific Islander	7.5 %	7.6 %
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.9 %	0.8 %
Other	2.6 %	0.2 %
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Hispanic	18.0 %	17.5 %
Non-Hispanic	82.0 %	82.5 %
<i>Education</i>		
Less than High School	9.5 %	11.4 %
High School or Equivalent	29.6 %	27.6 %
Some College/Associates Degree	32.8 %	30.4 %
Four-Year College Degree or Higher	28.1 %	30.6 %
<i>Party Affiliation (registered voters only, n=839)</i>		
Democrat	34.9 %	33.0 %
Independent/Other	36.3 %	38.0 %
Republican	28.8 %	29.0 %

About our Research Team

Zach Blair-Andrews is a student in the Judy Genshaft Honors College at the University of South Florida. He is majoring in Political Science and minoring in Public Administration. Zach has been actively involved in Student Government, and he is currently interning with a member of the Florida House of Representatives through the USF Legislative Internship Program.

Stephen Neely (PhD, North Carolina State University, 2013) is an Associate Professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of South Florida. He is coordinator of the School's undergraduate program in *Leadership and Public Service*. His areas of specialization include survey research, quantitative data analysis, and public policy. He has conducted survey research on behalf of local governments in the Tampa Bay region. Dr. Neely can be contacted by email at srneely@usf.edu

Sam Reчек is a junior at the University of South Florida majoring in Political Science and Philosophy with minors in Economics and History. Sam is passionate about the First Amendment's value for democratic law and society, and his activities are motivated by engaging students with their rights on campus. A native of Eau Claire, WI, after college, he aspires to attend law school in hopes of becoming an appellate judge.

Joshua M. Scacco (PhD, University of Texas at Austin, 2014) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. He is the co-author of *The Ubiquitous Presidency: Presidential Communication and Digital Democracy in Tumultuous Times* (Oxford University Press, 2021). Scacco also serves as a Faculty Research Associate with the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. He specializes in political communication, media content and effects, public opinion, and quantitative research methods. For more information, please visit [his USF Communication page](#).

Courtney Wilkerson is student in the Judy Genshaft honors college at the University of south Florida. She is majoring in political science with a minor in public service and leadership. She is passionate about community development and has served as intern to the Hillsborough County Anti-Human Trafficking project. Courtney has also participated in the National science foundation ICORP program. She plans to attend graduate school and hopes to work for the housing and community development division of the city of Tampa.

About the Florida Center for Cybersecurity: The Florida Center for Cyber Security (also known as Cyber Florida) was established by the State of Florida in 2014 to make the Sunshine State one of the most cyber-secure in the nation by promoting cybersecurity education, research, and outreach in partnership with the 12 State University System of Florida (SUS) institutions. Hosted by the University of South Florida, the Center is committed to increasing the number of K-12 students interested in and prepared for careers in cybersecurity and related STEM disciplines.

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