

# Understanding the Role of Social Media Content in Inducing Anxiety: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

*Anxiety is associated with adverse effects on social media users' well-being. While previous research focused on understanding whether social media usage behavior, such as time spent on social media, elicits feelings of anxiety, scant attention has been paid to exploring the role of social media content in inducing feelings of anxiety. To address this research gap, a qualitative study with 249 social media users was conducted. Our results reveal six content categories that are likely to elicit anxiety: negative news, incivility, social comparison content, political content, misinformation, and content depicting dangerous behavior. By shedding light on these content categories, this study contributes to our understanding of the negative implications of social media on users. In addition, the results are relevant for platform providers and mental health practitioners seeking to mitigate negative online experiences and promote well-being.*

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Social Media Content, Negative Emotions, Qualitative Study, Well-being

## 1. Introduction

Social media use has become an integral part of today's life. As of 2024, Facebook has reached 3 billion monthly active users, and YouTube follows closely with 2.5 billion users (Statista, 2024d). Given these platforms' popularity, the effects of social media use on users' well-being have been researched. Users spend approximately 143 minutes daily on social media (Statista, 2024a), raising concerns about the potential negative impact of social media on their well-being (e.g., Appel et al., 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Krasnova et al., 2015; Krause et al., 2021; Kross et al., 2013).

Within this literature, anxiety is intricately linked to well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995). It has been a topic of interest either on its own (Dhir et al., 2018; Seabrook et al., 2016) or as a mediator in the relationship between

social media use and well-being (Liu & Ma, 2020). Defined as "an uncontrollable, diffuse, unpleasant, and persistent state of negative affect" (Barlow, 2002), anxiety is a universal human experience and one of the most common emotions (Freeman & DiTomasso, 1994; Stein & Sareen, 2015). According to the World Health Organization (2023), anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental health condition, with implications for various life outcomes, such as mental and physical health (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; Kessler et al., 2010). Recent data from the National Center for Health Statistics (2024) reveals that 17.7% of adults in the United States report experiencing symptoms of anxiety disorder, such as feeling nervous, anxious, on edge, or worried more than half the days or nearly every day. Younger adults experience anxiety even more frequently (30.2% for 18-29-year-olds).

As social media continues to play a significant role in many people's day-to-day lives, understanding the factors that contribute to social media-induced anxiety is important. Prior research has mainly focused on the frequency and duration of social media use and the diverse ways these platforms are used. These usage patterns range from active communication with friends to more passive activities, such as observing social news streams, each of which may have different implications for anxiety (Burke et al., 2010). However, recent reviews show that findings on the magnitude and direction of the relationship between time spent on social media platforms and well-being are inconclusive (Huang, 2017; Valkenburg et al., 2022), including anxiety (Keles et al., 2020; Seabrook et al., 2016). Notably, during the time spent on the site, social media is used for numerous social and informational purposes since it allows users access to unlimited content anytime and anywhere (Kane et al., 2014; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Although content consumption and social interactions are central to social media, a recent umbrella literature review highlights that there is a lack of research focusing on the content of social media interactions (e.g., Valkenburg et al., 2022), which may be more important than time spent on social media (e.g.,

Meier and Reinecke, 2021). Even distinguishing between different activities at the interaction level (e.g., active and passive use patterns) to analyze the harmful effects of social media use on well-being may conflate too diverse features, contents, and interactions. As a result, previous studies advocate for a shift toward other units of analysis (e.g., Meier et al., 2023). However, current research offers limited insights into the impact of content on users' experience of anxiety on social media (Keles et al., 2020; Seabrook et al., 2016). The vast amount of information that is shared on these platforms makes it imperative to investigate categories of social media content that may provoke anxiety. To address this research gap, the current study takes a more fine-grained view and investigates exposure to content that may influence users' feelings of anxiety. Thus, we aim to answer the following research question: *Which social media content categories are perceived as anxiety-inducing by social media users?*

To examine this research question, we conducted a study with 249 social media users to gain a nuanced understanding of anxiety-inducing social media content. Our contributions to the existing literature are threefold. First, based on an extensive literature review, we identified that anxiety is predominantly associated with general social media usage metrics, such as time spent on social media sites (see Seabrook et al., 2016). By adopting a content-centric perspective and exploring content as a source of anxiety, we enrich the growing body of research that examines the implications of content types on individual well-being (e.g., Lin et al., 2018; Meier et al., 2020; Schreurs et al., 2022). Second, as social media use has been increasingly associated with "dark sides," our study provides evidence that specific content types are linked to feelings of anxiety. These findings contribute to the emerging research stream that focuses on socially conscious and value-oriented information systems (IS) (e.g., Spiekermann et al., 2022). Lastly, from a practical standpoint, understanding the factors contributing to social media-induced anxiety provides insights for social media users, mental health professionals, and social media platform developers. Indeed, our findings help users become more aware of potential sources of anxiety and inform platform providers about how the content on their platforms affects users' experiences.

## 2. Background

In this section, we briefly explain social media platforms, define anxiety, and summarize prior literature studying anxiety on social media.

### 2.1 Social media and well-being

Social media has fundamentally transformed how we communicate by enabling real-time connections, fostering online communities, and providing a platform for exchanging thoughts and sharing a wide array of content (Kane et al., 2014). Such content refers to the information shared on these platforms, comprising written text, images, videos, or virtually any digital representation (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015).

Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram are among the most widely used social networking sites (SNSs) (Statista, 2024d). Other examples of social media platforms are YouTube and Pinterest, which focus on media sharing. Prior studies on social media and well-being primarily relied on studying individual platforms, opting for a single-platform approach, such as exclusively examining Facebook (Krasnova et al., 2015; Meier & Reinecke, 2021). Recent literature highlights that this approach limits the breadth of evidence, as findings from isolated applications may lack generalizability over time (Meier & Reinecke, 2021). Despite variations in features among social media platforms, there are overarching design and functional commonalities among popular ones (Carter et al., 2023). Therefore, Carter et al. (2023) recommend exploring how users perceive the effects of engaging with similar content feeds across multiple platforms rather than fixating on studying a single social media platform.

### 2.2 Social media use and anxiety

Anxiety is defined as an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts, and physical effects, such as increased blood pressure. Anxiety and fear are often used interchangeably, but they have different characteristics. Anxiety is considered a future-oriented response to a diffuse threat, while fear is a response to an identifiable and specific threat (American Psychological Association, 2024; Crocq, 2015). Clinical judgment determines the threshold between normal adaptive anxiety in everyday life and pathological anxiety that necessitates treatment (Crocq, 2015).

For the background of this study and to understand the mechanisms explored in previous research, we reviewed 80 studies examining the relationship between social media use and anxiety. We extracted the independent variables and their effects on anxiety. Table 1 provides an overview of selected studies examining the negative relationship between social media use and anxiety, highlighting the mechanisms involved.

<b>Mechanisms</b>	<b>Authors</b>
<b>Social media use</b>	
Use (intensity)	Sun (2023); Yang et al. (2023); Labrague (2014)
Time spent	Vannucci et al. (2017); Yan et al. (2017)
Addiction	Zhou et al. (2023); Lozano Blasco et al. (2023); Seabrook et al. (2016)
Number of social networks	Primack et al. (2017)
<b>Language features and social comparisons</b>	
Negative sentiment	Saifullah et al. (2021)
Social comparison	Jiang et al. (2020); Seekis and Kennedy (2023)
<b>Personality</b>	
Personality factors and motivations	Parsons et al. (2019); Lee and Jang (2019); Jiang et al. (2020); Drouin et al. (2018)

**Table 1. Unfavorable association between social media and users' anxiety: Overview of selected findings**

Prior research indicates that social media use is associated with feelings of anxiety. Some studies report a positive association between social media use and anxiety (e.g., Deloatch et al., 2017), while others find negative relationships (e.g., Labrague, 2014; Sun, 2023; Vannucci et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2017) or no relationship (e.g., Feinstein et al., 2012). For example, enhanced social support, increased social connectedness, positive interactions, and social media breaks can reduce anxiety levels (Lambert et al., 2022; Seabrook et al., 2016). Conversely, passive social media use and social comparisons were linked to higher anxiety levels (Lai et al., 2023; Seabrook et al., 2016). As there is no clear association between time spent on social media and anxiety, research suggests that this relationship is multifaceted (for a review, see Lopes et al., 2022; Seabrook et al., 2016) and that overall time spent on social media or active and passive use patterns might be too unspecific (Frison & Eggermont, 2016). In addition to the amount of time spent on social media, studies indicate that problematic social media users are more likely to experience anxiety compared to non-compulsive users (Lepp et al., 2014). Furthermore, users who engage with seven to eleven social media platforms face substantially higher odds of experiencing elevated anxiety levels (Primack et al., 2017).

Moreover, personality factors seem to be important. For example, previous studies show that user groups, especially those with pre-existing anxiety or depression,

may be more susceptible to the adverse impacts of social media on mental health (Drouin et al., 2018). Similarly, research has proposed that higher anxiety levels may be associated with greater social media use, particularly during the evening hours (Woods & Scott, 2016).

While previous studies have primarily focused on quantitative SNS use measures (e.g., screen time, problematic use) and more specific, but still broad, usage patterns as causes of anxiety, some studies have provided a glimpse into content effects. Research has shown that content providing grounds for social comparison may impact anxiety (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023; Yang et al., 2023). For example, research found that viewing specific types of content, such as beauty tips on TikTok, has been shown to increase appearance anxiety and shame (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). Additionally, exposure to negative sentiments in social media comments is associated with elevated levels of anxiety (Saifullah et al., 2021). So far, previous studies lack an overview of content categories on social media that are associated with feelings of anxiety. Therefore, this study explores whether different social media content categories are linked to feelings of anxiety.

### 3. Research method

An online survey was conducted in September 2023 on Prolific, a widely utilized platform for data collection in IS research (Fink, 2022; Peer et al., 2022). We recruited participants from the United States aged between 18 and 44 years because this age group has the highest social media usage (e.g., Statista, 2024c, 2024b). Moreover, prior research shows that this user group is vulnerable to the adverse effects of social media (e.g., Krasnova et al., 2015; Kross et al., 2013; Meythaler et al., 2023). We prescreened participants based on their past performance on Prolific, accepting only those with an approval rate greater than 90 percent. After the data collection, only four responses that failed a language quality check were excluded from the data analysis. The final sample comprised 249 social media users aged between 18 and 44 years. Half of the participants (51.8%) were between 25 and 34 years old. A gender-balanced approach was employed, resulting in an even distribution of male (48.6%) and female participants (48.6%), with 2.4% identifying as diverse and 0.4% no response. Most participants held university-level education qualifications (55.0%) and worked full-time (59.4%).

Considering the increasingly dynamic social media reality, this study adopts a multiplatform approach aligned with recommendations from recent research on social media and well-being. The survey comprised a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions and was structured as follows. After providing informed

consent, participants were surveyed about their social media use with the following questions: “Which social media platforms do you use (i.e., you visit at least once per week)?” (Question 1.1) and “On which social media platform do you spend most of your time?” (Question 1.2). Subsequently, participants were asked about specific content categories on social media that contribute to anxiety. This question was presented in an open-ended format, which is useful when the range of potential answers is unknown and cannot be captured by predefined options (Züll, 2016). Prior research suggests that anxiety and mental health issues can be challenging to express openly (Voncken et al., 2006). For example, some people may fear being judged negatively if they share their worries. Therefore, the statement “Social Media use has been shown to promote anxiety among users” was included in Question 1.3 to encourage respondents to reflect on and share instances of anxiety-inducing instances on social media. Such techniques are used in survey designs to reduce social pressure (Donoghue, 2000; Krasnova et al., 2013). Specifically, we asked: “*Social Media use has been shown to promote anxiety among users. What kinds of posts, content, or social interactions do you observe on social media that make you feel anxious?*” (Question 1.3). In a direct follow-up question, respondents were asked about the social media platform they had in mind when answering the previous question: “*Which social media platform(s) did you have in mind when you answered the previous question about anxiety? You can select more than one platform.*” (Question 1.4). The survey ended with demographic questions.

Since previous research does not offer a systematic, unified view on categorizing anxiety-inducing social media content, we conducted a qualitative content analysis. We derived the coding scheme in an inductive process (Mayring, 2014). Prior research on the “dark sides” of social media (e.g., fake news, political polarization, addiction) (e.g., Kim & Dennis, 2019; Spiekermann et al., 2022) was consulted to inform our decisions in the process of merging open codes into more global categories. In addition, we used the AI tool ChatGPT to verify our thinking as to which global categories emerge (Hitch, 2023; Morgan, 2023).

Participants could mention more than one anxiety-provoking instance. Therefore, coders were permitted to code single units of analysis into several categories. The data corpus was first open-coded by one author of the study, and an independent coder was subsequently trained to ensure the reliability of the coding process. The comparison of the two coding solutions revealed a high level of agreement between both coders. In the case of a disagreement, the authors made the final decision on the attribution of a code by consensus.

A total of eight categories emerged from the data analysis. Among these eight categories, six categories were directly related to content types, while two additional categories were needed to code the whole data set. Responses from participants who did not report experiencing anxiety were coded under the category “No Anxiety.” The “Other” category was used for responses that were either too vague to be accurately coded or referred to content types mentioned by only very few respondents.

As categories were found in several answers, a frequency analysis of the category occurrences is useful (Mayring, 2014). The frequencies of the categories make it possible to compare the importance of the identified categories (Mayring, 2014; Vogelsang et al., 2013). The results are presented in Table 3.

#### 4. Results

Participants reported spending the most time on YouTube (28.9%), Instagram (22.5%), and TikTok (16.1%). The most popular social media platforms were YouTube (81.9%), Instagram (71.9%), and Facebook (67.1%). When answering the open-ended question about anxiety-inducing instances on social media, Instagram was mentioned in 24.2% (n=111) of cases, closely followed by Facebook with 20.5% (n=94). Twitter/X was mentioned by 18.7% (n=86), and TikTok was reported by 16.1% (n=74). Table 2 provides an overview of the results concerning the social media platforms users had in mind when answering Question 1.3.

Social media platform	Share of respondents
Instagram	24.2%
Facebook	20.5%
Twitter/X	18.7%
TikTok	16.1%
YouTube	13.3%
Snapchat	5.7%
Other	1.5%

Note: N=230 (Share of respondents who reported anxiety on social media)

**Table 2. Social media platforms and anxiety (% share of respondents)**

In our analysis, we identified the following categories of social media content that contribute to anxiety: negative news, incivility, social comparison, political content, misinformation, and violent or dangerous content. Among these, “Negative News Content” was the most frequently reported category, mentioned by 22.1% of respondents, followed by

“Incivility Content” and “Social Comparison Content,” each reported by 20.9% of respondents.

Categories	Key subcategories from open coding
Social Media Content Categories	
Negative News Content (22.1%)	Bad events, negative news about society (e.g., state of the country, environmental disasters, diseases), war news
Incivility Content (20.9%)	Hate, trolls, threats, harassment, racist remarks, bullying, insults, discrimination, mean pranks, name-calling
Social Comparison Content (20.9%)	Perfect life, luxurious lifestyles, wealth and economic status, trips and travel, achievements, looking a certain way, attractiveness, fit body, beauty, motherhood, children
Political Content (11.2%)	Extreme political views, right propaganda, political views one disapproves of, concerning political discourse
Misinformation Content (8.4%)	Misleading claims, misinformation, conspiracy theories, rumors, edited photos
Violent and Dangerous Content (5.2%)	Dangerous activities, hazardous challenges, accidents, harming oneself or others, animal abuse
Further Categories	
Other (24.1%)	Privacy concerns, addiction and problematic use concerns, undefined inappropriate or disturbing content, personalized content, vague answers
No Anxiety (7.6%)	Absence of feeling anxiety

**Table 3. Anxiety-inducing content categories on social media (% share of respondents)**

**Negative News Content:** Respondents mentioned their exposure to negative news as a source of anxiety on social media. This category encompasses coverage of various societal issues, such as the state of the country, climate change, distressing events such as trauma, war, and death, as well as fear-mongering posts, particularly those related to diseases. For example, one participant expressed, “*I often see sensational news headlines that describe horrible news events around the world.*” Moreover, the continuous influx of information

intensified by the fast-paced nature of platforms like TikTok contributed to one respondent’s anxiety: „[...] *I think there are a lot of posts about the news and the current state of the world, and a lot of posts about politics that make me feel very anxious. This is especially true considering the fact that TikTok and other websites value putting a lot of information into a very short span of time without a lot of thought before moving on to the next thing. Sometimes it can feel like a lot when you're scrolling all day, and you see ten different ways the world is getting worse within the span of an hour.*”

**Incivility Content:** Participants mentioned instances of hate directed at both individuals and groups, reflecting a spectrum of harmful behaviors, including threats, harassment, bullying, insults, racist remarks, and various forms of discrimination (Antoci et al., 2016). For instance, one respondent expressed concern: “*Hateful posts make me feel somewhat anxious. I really worry for the world when I see people being aggressively homophobic or racist.*” Furthermore, another participant shed light on the nature of hate speech by mentioning body shaming, noting “*people talking down to people because of their weight or personal appearance.*” This underscores the diverse manifestations of hate on social media, including aspects of personal identity and appearance. Moreover, a respondent highlighted that incivility is sometimes disguised as freedom of speech. This observation reflects the challenges in identifying and addressing it. Notably, incivility is often part of comments, as stated by another participant, “*I only watch videos on YouTube - those do not give me anxiety. Looking at the comments, however, will give you anxiety. People are just so mean for no reason.*” These examples emphasize the role of user-generated content and the potentially distressing nature of interactions on social media.

**Social Comparison Content:** Respondents mentioned content reflecting others’ superior wealth and status. This included viewing posts that created a perception of others being ahead in life or leading seemingly flawless lives. Participants described instances where they observed other users sharing thriving lifestyles or possessions that they themselves do not possess. For example, one participant articulated the challenge: “*[...] it's also hard to see people my age living luxurious and extravagant lives. It makes me feel really awful about myself and my lifestyle. Also, seeing beautiful, fit, flawless, perfect women all the time over and over again is awful for my self-esteem, but I don't even do anything to try to limit my social media use. I just let it happen and let myself be upset, and I hate it. [...]*” Beyond material possessions, participants noted that seemingly ordinary content could contribute to anxiety. The continuous exposure to photos of happy

people led one participant to reflect on their own happiness, stating, “[...] other times just “normal” content can contribute to anxiety, like all the photos of happy people which lead one to think everybody else is happy, so why am I unhappy?” This example underscores the impact of seemingly mundane content that can contribute to heightened levels of anxiety.

**Political Content:** A subset of respondents reported encounters with politically disturbing content, propaganda, posts contradicting their political views, and content that amplifies extreme political perspectives. One participant expressed unease, stating: “I feel anxious when someone important to me posts political things that go against what I believe.” This example shows the emotional impact of political content, particularly when it conflicts with personal convictions and comes from close social contacts. Another respondent shared concerns about inflammatory posts: “Inflammatory posts, mostly political or about social issues. Sometimes, it’s just the comments on these.” This answer underscores the broader impact of the initial post, including the subsequent discussions and comments. Moreover, a participant emphasized the temporal component of anxiety-inducing political content, stating, “Political ones definitely do that, especially during election season. I had that big time during the 2020 Election, and I expect it to be worse in 2024.”

**Misinformation Content:** Some respondents highlighted their exposure to intentionally misleading, false, or deceptive content, such as conspiracy theories, rumor-spreading, and instances where individuals falsely embellish their lives or employ editing tools. This category reflects the concern over the potential impact of misinformation, which can influence the beliefs and actions of those who encounter it. For example, one respondent stated, “I feel anxious about some fake posts and content. Some people will believe that and follow it.” Another participant expressed this anxiety about posts that are untrue or hastily posted without thought, explaining, “The posts that are untrue or are being posted quickly without thought. Those cause me anxiety because I know a lot of people take things for face value and could cause harm this way.”

**Violent and Dangerous Content:** Finally, social media content featuring dangerous activities and risk-taking behaviors was mentioned as anxiety-inducing. One respondent articulated their anxiety, stating, “When I see people doing dangerous things. Like driving unsafely or jumping off cliffs. That kind of content always makes me feel anxious.” Furthermore, another participant expressed heightened anxiety related to “anything that people share that mentions child abuse or animal abuse, especially when there are pictures involved.” Exposure to content that crosses ethical boundaries, posing potential harm to vulnerable individuals or animals, may elicit anxiety.

## 5. Discussion

An estimated 4.9 billion people actively use social media. Therefore, the proactive management and prevention of potential risks associated with platform usage is increasingly relevant. Among the negative emotions related to social media use, anxiety has received significant attention in both research and public discourse (Keles et al., 2020). Given the widespread prevalence of anxiety and its consequential impacts on users, it is essential to identify how social media use influences users. Prior research has predominantly used quantitative methods and concentrated on analyzing the frequency of social media use or usage patterns (e.g., Meier et al., 2023). However, a few studies have shifted the focus toward content effects. For example, negative sentiment and content fueling social comparisons may contribute to anxiety. Building on these findings, this qualitative study represents an initial step toward identifying social media content categories that users perceive as anxiety-inducing. The results revealed six distinct categories, which can be broadly associated with social and informational content dimensions (Jiao et al., 2017; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). A notable theme revolves around exposure to bad news, fear-mongering, and negative information. News stories covering global events, political unrest, economic trends, and social issues that emerged as significant triggers. Particularly anxiety-inducing on social media were posts related to wars and the state of the world,

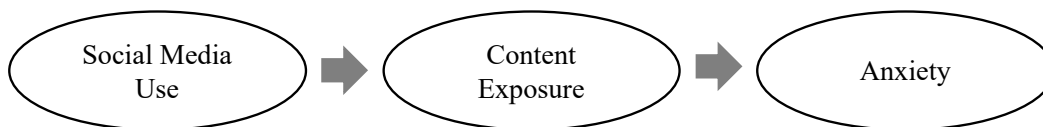


Figure 1. Research model

with respondents expressing heightened anxiety when encountering bad news about the environment, economy, diseases, or true crime.

Besides negative news, incivility was a prominent category, with participants describing instances of threats, harassment, bullying, and various forms of discrimination. The diverse manifestations of incivility, including attacks on personal identity and appearance, underscore the complexity and pervasive nature of these personal assaults on social media.

Another prevalent factor contributing to feelings of anxiety was upward social comparison, driven by content that portrays others with a superior status. This finding aligns with previous research linking self-evaluations in social comparisons to heightened levels of depression and anxiety (McCarthy & Morina, 2020). Specifically, participants detailed the emotional impact of content reflecting others' wealth, social status, and seemingly flawless lifestyles, including curated images of others' happiness.

Beyond content related to social interactions, misinformation emerged as a distinct source of anxiety, with participants expressing concern over intentionally misleading or false content. In addition, political content, where posts that contradict personal views and reinforce extreme left or right-wing views, caused anxiety. Moreover, the participants highlighted the emotional impact of violent or risk-raking content, such as those depicting hazardous challenges. Based on our analysis, we propose the research model in Figure 1 and suggest that future research should examine how spending time on social media is linked to users' exposure to different content categories and what kind of content is most likely to foster anxiety on social media.

## 5.1 Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes to prior research on anxiety experienced on social media platforms and addresses a critical research gap highlighted in previous literature (e.g., Valkenburg et al., 2022). Following Meier et al. (2023), the distinction between different activities for analyzing the adverse effects of SNS use on well-being may oversimplify diverse features, contents, and interactions, prompting a call for a shift toward alternative units of analysis. Although social media content is a dimension deemed essential for generating a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on mental health (Valkenburg et al., 2022; Meier and Reinecke, 2021), studies examining social media content and anxiety are rare (see Table 1). Our study aligns with the call for a more nuanced approach by examining social media content. Thereby, our findings contribute to IS research on well-being and the dark

sides of social media use (e.g., Krasnova et al., 2015; Spiekermann et al., 2022).

Furthermore, our findings offer several practical implications for users, platform designers, and mental health experts. By understanding how specific content types may contribute to anxiety, users can become more mindful of how content may impact their well-being. Based on this awareness, they can make more informed decisions about their social media usage. Educational interventions could be developed to raise awareness about the types of content users consume and the potential emotional impacts. Mental health experts can use these findings to offer more effective support to clients who experience anxiety.

Negative user experiences, including those associated with anxiety, may lead to users discontinuing their use of social media (e.g., Maier et al., 2015; Venkatesh et al., 2011). Since feelings of anxiety are unpleasant, users might avoid situations that have previously triggered anxious or negative emotions. For platform providers, this poses a threat to user retention and platform sustainability. Platform providers have started to employ content-based countermeasures, such as content screens, content moderation, fake news flagging, and trigger warnings, to mitigate potentially distressing experiences (Pennycook et al., 2020). However, research suggests that exposure to such screens alone causes already negative responses measured by state anxiety and negative affect (Takarangi et al., 2023). Therefore, beyond content moderation, there may be a need to reduce the emphasis on social comparison metrics to reduce anxiety triggers (Meythaler et al., 2023). To conclude, it is essential for users' well-being that we consider how and when the impact of specific content types, such as negative news and violent content, contributes to feelings of anxiety on social media.

## 5.2 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, our study focused on the largest user group of social media. However, examining whether these findings generalize to additional age groups is important (Kross et al., 2013). Second, qualitative studies involve subjective interpretation of data, and this study relied on self-reporting data, which may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias. Moreover, in line with efforts to improve the generalizability of evidenced effects by transitioning from single to multiplatform studies (e.g., Beyens et al., 2020), this exploratory study examined multiple social media platforms (e.g., Carter et al., 2023; Meier & Reinecke, 2021). Further research could conduct a cross-platform analysis (e.g., Meier et al., 2023; Waterloo et al., 2018).

Importantly, this study provides the foundation for future research to quantitatively measure social media content's role in inducing anxiety. Subsequent studies could measure informational content (e.g., misinformation, political content, negative news) and social content (e.g., incivility, upward social comparison information) to empirically evaluate the extent to which exposure to these content dimensions influences anxiety levels among social media users (see Figure 1). In addition, we suggest using experimental and longitudinal study designs (Valkenburg et al., 2022). For example, social media feeds could be designed to capture specific platform feature effects (e.g., Fink, 2022; Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). Beyond experiments, studies could collect screenshots to extract text and images, or through archives of social media interactions (Ohme et al., 2023). Finally, future research may examine how countermeasures, such as content screens, and different content categories interact and what kind of content exposure is especially anxiety-inducing to foster well-being on social media.

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