

Why advancing health equity must include equitable regulation of social media



Elizabeth Lees, DO, University of Minnesota School of Public Health

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Abstract

Social media is pervasive in our society as a means of connecting with others and consuming news. However, social media has also come under scrutiny for its ability to negatively influence social attitudes and behaviors, especially in the United States where political polarization is at an all-time high. Left unregulated, social media has the power to spread dangerous hate rhetoric and even inspire acts of real-life violence. Many Americans are suffering mental health consequences as a result. Equitable regulation of social media is necessary to protect our society and promote public health.

The average person spends 2 hours and 27 minutes [per day](#) on social media. We are more connected than ever before with the advent of apps like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Despite this progress in technological connectivity, the United States is perhaps as [polarized](#) as it has ever been. The rise of these platforms meant to bond people is instead contributing to the issues of division in the United States. Social media platforms are amplifying white supremacy, emboldening hate groups, and curtailing movements toward health equity and justice in the United States. On an individual level, media consumers are left feeling [more disconnected than ever](#). In the United States, our complicated relationship with social media is evolving into a series of public health issues.

Social media deserves public health's attention because it is [widespread, widely unregulated, and influences our attitudes and behaviors](#). Similar to "mob mentality", social media can lead individuals to abandon their established beliefs in lieu of collective beliefs fostered by the feelings [inspired on social media](#). Often, these collective feelings are rooted in hatred and lead to hate-fueled actions toward marginalized groups. In addition to the [real-life violence](#) arising from social media, we also find that hate rhetoric is selectively directed at certain groups, widening disparities already present in the cracks of the U.S. foundation. Amid such broadly circulating hate and violence, large numbers of social media consumers are left feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and anxious.

One such hate-fueled social media movement starting in 2021 was [#whiteboysummer](#) or #WBS. This hashtag started innocuously as a play on rapper Meghan Thee Stallion's song *Hot Girl Summer*. It was meant to ridicule the average white male's clothing and behavior. However,

#WBS was quickly adopted by extreme white supremacists as a hashtag to peddle their racist comments on social media under the guise of irony or jest. Extremist accounts have become skilled at [veiling their messages](#) behind aesthetic images or memes to attract unassuming mainstream traffic. Given the [large volume of youth](#) interacting with social media daily, there is enormous potential for recruitment of naïve followers.

At its worst, white supremacy social media has been implicated in deadly acts such as the [January 6th](#) attack on the U.S. Capitol and the [Buffalo, NY, shooting](#) in May 2022. Experts who study social media largely blame the distorted conspiracy theory turned mainstream philosophy known as "[Replacement Theory](#)" for justifying racist, hate-filled acts against marginalized groups. Like #whiteboysummer, Replacement Theory is easily manipulated into indirect messages about [immigrants replacing American voters](#) or [Jews controlling the media](#). These veiled messages gain momentum with impressionable followers on social media and quickly evolve.

While censorship has been a major issue in curbing the circulation of white supremacist rhetoric on social media, it has been equally problematic as a [roadblock](#) for many Black activists spreading their messages on social media. This is because media [algorithms](#) selectively filter and remove what has been labeled confrontational or incendiary. In many cases this includes direct mention of phrases such as "white supremacy", "Black power", or even "Black success" while overlooking covert mentions of #WBS. So while white extremist hate speech is free to circulate on social media platforms, the voices of [Black minority activists are silenced](#). Since Black content creators are more likely to be moderated, they are also less

likely than their white counterparts to amass [influencer wealth and status](#).

Black Americans are not the only target. Social media hate rhetoric and violence has also disproportionately affected [Asians](#), [Jews](#), [Muslims](#), [LGBTQ+ communities](#), and [immigrants](#) in the United States. At least three-quarters of online hate speech victims are members of [minority groups](#), and [women](#) belonging to all groups are disproportionately targeted. Americans are feeling the emotional toll, with 64% of surveyed Americans reporting they believe social media has had a [negative effect](#) on affairs in our country. A CNN News poll from 2022 found that 90% of adults in the United States say our country is now facing a [mental health crisis](#).

Though minorities experience depression at similar rates to white Americans, minority groups are less likely to have access to mental health resources. Accordingly, people of color bear a [higher burden of disability](#) from their mental health diagnoses, and there has been a steep [rise in suicide rates](#) among people of color in the United States. Adolescent women and LGBTQ+ youth are particularly vulnerable to the intersectional effects of mental health [trauma](#). Mental health disparities contribute to the growing public health problem of deepening health inequities in the United States.

Health inequities in the United States have set us [far behind](#) in healthcare standards compared to other developed countries. Widening race and social divisions only make this worse. Promoting social justice and equality is not just the right thing: it is a necessary thing for [improving the health of all Americans](#). With the pervasiveness of social media, it is important that we [take steps](#) in the United States to regulate social media content that has real-life repercussions on perpetuating inequities. This starts with moderating, and in some cases removing, users who operate with large, influential platforms to spread [discriminatory messages](#). Politicians and public health advocates should lobby to hold big social media corporations accountable for the harm they are [knowingly perpetuating](#). New public health policies can focus on meaningful steps like [changing the way information is shared](#) on social media sites and addressing [biased filtering algorithms](#). Finally, local public health agencies must prioritize providing culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health resources to historically marginalized populations in their communities.

Those who object to social media moderation argue in favor of [upholding the First Amendment](#). This has raised a powerful question about whether private companies like Facebook and Twitter that operate as social networking sites should be able to censor speech. In the context of rising violence, widening health inequities, and an escalating national mental health crisis, there should be no question as to whether increased censorship is warranted. Social media clearly poses a series of threatening public health problems. Left unchecked, social media will continue to propagate dangerous divisions and inequities in the United States that inspire real-life harm. We have seen how ideologies that start behind a screen translate to violence and poor mental health outcomes in the real world, and it must be stopped now.

Author Contact Information

Elizabeth Lees: lees0040@umn.edu

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