
Problematic Media Use as a Content-Agnostic, Enforceable Harm

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1 Introduction

Many users of internet platforms spend more time online than they want. Parents report frequent arguments with their children about transitioning away from media or looking up from their phone (Radesky et al. 2024), teens describe social media or gaming eating up time they would rather spend sleeping or outdoors (Weinstein and James 2022), and adults feel guilty for getting stuck in a loop of content (Torres et al. 2021). In its most extreme form, overuse manifests as problematic media use (PMU), defined as digital media use that is risky, compulsive, feels out of control, causes impairments in daily functioning (e.g., sleep problems, arguments, school problems), and persists despite negative consequences (Rega, Gioia, and Boursier 2023; Pluhar et al. 2019).

In this commentary, we explore PMU as a possible objective metric that could be measured and mitigated by online platforms in order to reduce related harms and impaired user functioning. PMU is unique among online harms in that its potential telemetry correlates (e.g., data regarding frequency and timing of pickups, posts, etc.) can be directly measured by platforms, both at baseline and in response to design changes directed by trust and safety teams. Such measures could be mandated by policymakers and monitored through regulation as a content-agnostic approach to improving user well-being.

2 Problematic media use as a function of problematic platform design

What drives PMU, who bears responsibility for it, and what can it tell us about the people and products involved? Both tech industry messaging (e.g., Meta Family Center (n.d.) and TikTok Safety Center (n.d.)) and public discourse (Mayer 2025) place the locus of responsibility on the individuals who use these platforms, following a decades-long history of US industries emphasizing individual responsibility over corporate responsibility (Friedman et al. 2015; Kwan 2009). Users themselves have internalized this narrative, which has led to the widespread belief that individual weakness and lack of self-control

drive overuse (Lanette et al. 2018).

However, psychological theories of PMU describe user experience (UX) design as a key driver of compulsive use (Domoff, Borgen, and Radesky 2020; Montag et al. 2023). When product teams are instructed to improve metrics of engagement—agnostic to what that engagement might be disrupting or displacing for the user (Owens and Lenhart 2025)—overuse and PMU can more accurately be described as expected byproducts of engagement-driven designs (Richards and Hartzog 2024). Engagement-prolonging designs, often working in combination, bait users with curiosity teasers, pressure users into returning to a platform on a particular schedule, and seamlessly transition users from one piece of content to the next to reduce friction and remove natural stopping points (Chen et al. 2024). These designs include but are not limited to:

- Social quantification features, tagging, visible follower and friend counts, and other designs that induce social comparison and fear of missing out (Montag et al. 2023, Alutaybi et al. 2019)
- Time-pressured or ephemeral designs, such as livestreams or streaks, that coerce users into engaging even at inopportune moments (Chen and Cheung 2019)
- Gambling-type designs (e.g., loot boxes) that create anticipation and operate on statistical chance and variable rewards (González-Cabrera et al. 2023, Carey, Delfabbro, and King 2022)
- Low-friction infinite scroll with autoplay, which reduces user agency and extends time online (Lu et al. 2024, Orzikulova et al. 2023)
- Notifications, particularly those that are algorithmically timed to occur when most effective (Whiting and Murdock 2021)

These designs increase the cognitive and emotional burdens associated with disengaging from online content for all users, but some users are more vulnerable to these tactics than others, increasing their risk of PMU. For example, children (<13 years) and teens (13–17 years) have weaker impulse control and self-monitoring, and higher reward sensitivity than adults, which translate to more difficulty exerting self-determination in their use of social, gaming, or companion AI platforms that are replete with engagement-prolonging designs (Chen et al. 2024, 5 Rights Foundation 2023). And dysregulated behavior, mood, and impulse control can all impact users' resilience and ability to resist designs that encourage and reinforce repeated engagement (Domoff, Borgen, and Radesky 2020). Thus, PMU can be thought of as driven by problematic design and exacerbated by individual vulnerabilities.

3 The canary in the coal mine: PMU as a tool for detecting problematic platform design

In clinical settings, PMU is recognized as an important problem worthy of intervention. Treatment goals include improving mood regulation, coping skills, social functioning, school progress, and family relationships (Nereim, Bickham, and Rich 2019). However, it is currently underleveraged as a signal for detecting the problematic platform designs that drive it. Here, we argue that PMU is more than just a harmful phenomenon in its own right; its detectable, measurable nature also makes it a promising tool for platform evaluation.

PMU is relatively common, although prevalence estimates vary based on how it is measured. Using the Problematic and Risky Internet Use Screening Scale (PRIUSS), which measures media-related impairments in daily life, 9–54% of teen and young adult samples have reported problems with media use (Moreno et al. 2022; Moreno et al. 2019). When measuring PMU with more conservative scales (such as the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale, which assesses a narrower set of addiction-like symptoms), global prevalence estimates are closer to 5% (Cheng et al. 2021). In a recent publication from the US-based ABCD (Adolescent Brain and Cognitive Development) Study, 31.3% of children and teens ages 10 through 14 years showed increasing addictive use trajectories for social media and 24.6% for smartphones (Xiao et al. 2025). Taken together, this prior work shows that PMU is both common and detectable.

Based on publicly available research, it is not clear whether platforms have developed methods for understanding when their designs lead to functional impairments such as poor sleep, sedentary behavior, or overspending, despite having access to data that could signify compulsive or unsafe use (e.g., State Attorneys General 2025). Internal experimentation results released by whistleblowers (e.g., the Facebook Files) suggest that youth-focused research teams have tested the effects of design changes on narrow metrics such as negative social comparison (Mirza 2023), but not broader constructs such as impaired social functioning.

This is a missed opportunity. While many product safety and regulatory regimes involve testing and mitigation strategies that rely on proxies or risk factors for human harm (e.g., a factory measuring contaminants in nearby bodies of water; an infant formula manufacturer measuring bacterial contamination), they rarely have real-time direct measures of consumer harm. In contrast, the tech industry collects data directly about human experiences. The 2024 FTC 6(b) report on social media and video platforms revealed how such human experience data is transformed into behavioral profiles for marketing purposes (FTC 2024); thus, it could arguably be transformed into risk profiles for PMU. We therefore contend that (1) platforms have a responsibility to measure and mitigate problematic use of their platforms and the resulting declines in user functioning, and (2) policymakers can develop standards for enforcing measurement and mitigation

of this content-agnostic harm.

4 How platforms could measure PMU

Telemetry data frequently captures usage traces that could be interrogated for evidence of PMU. Patterns will likely differ across platforms, their functions, and their affordances, but may share key features that suggest disruption of daily functioning—such as usage in the overnight hours (e.g., midnight to 5 a.m. on school nights) or during school hours (i.e., suggesting that a child or teen can't resist using technology despite school phone policies).

Platforms could undertake investigations of the data patterns that suggest their platform has induced PMU, such as characterizing the top decile of users in terms of engagements and daily duration of use. Through surveys, interviews, or other data-driven sources (e.g., sentiment analysis, browser usage data, or other third-party data used for profiling; see [FTC 2024](#)), platforms could explore which users are struggling versus thriving. User-reported PMU or decreases in functioning could be correlated with usage trace patterns hypothesized to reflect compulsiveness (e.g., frequent checking of social quantification metrics; high responsiveness to time-based pressure or other engagement-prolonging designs; tendency to collect items and play until desired items are obtained; repeated information-searching binges).

In minors, any research involving interviews or mental health symptom surveys would need ethical oversight and parental informed consent, but would be a crucial start for understanding which children and youth are overusing the platform compared to family goals and needs. Other data-driven signals of problematic use by minors could include heavy spending, subverting parental controls, young children with hours and hours of video viewing per day, or tweens/teens with a lack of downtime away from their phone.

In summary, platform trust and safety teams have the potential to “phenotype” problematic users through both data-driven approaches and user-centered design work and then implement designs that can help restore user self-control and daily functioning.

5 How academics could measure PMU

Trust and safety teams have a natural tension with growth teams when it comes to engagement metrics that would help signal PMU. Without regulatory approaches that mandate monitoring users' data for signs of PMU, platforms will be unlikely to direct resources to these efforts. In the US, legislation about children's online health and safety—such as the Kids Online Safety Act—could specify problematic, compulsive, or

addictive-like use as a harm that platforms must measure and mitigate. Under the EU's Digital Services Act, platforms are required to disable features that drive excessive use such as "streaks" and "read receipts" (European Commission 2025), but PMU-related data signals could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of these measures.

In the meantime, researchers can start defining objective profiles of PMU in minors and adults. For example, McDaniel and colleagues tracked the smartphones of 264 parents for eight days and asked parents to complete a daily diary including time with their young children (McDaniel et al. 2024). Latent profile analysis of smartphone usage data found that the heaviest users, who had prolonged daily use of social media, mobile gaming, and other apps, also had the highest depression levels, worst sleep, and least time with their children.

In another example, researchers collaborating with the device monitoring platform Aura were able to detect when students were distracted with phones during school hours (Burnell et al. 2025) and are currently conducting a prospective cohort study to characterize associations between objective device data and a range of psychological, social, family, and health functioning measures (Kollins et al. 2025).

In the recent ABCD Study sample, self-reported addictive use of social media and smartphones was measured contemporaneously with passive sensing of smartphones in a large subsample of the cohort (Wade et al. 2021). This presents a unique opportunity to detect detailed smartphone usage patterns that correlate with feelings of addiction or the development of trajectories of higher addictive use.

In another study, Guo and colleagues automatically collected screenshots as users used their smartphones, which users could later annotate as moments they valued or moments they regretted (Guo et al. 2025). Feeding these screenshots to an LLM chatbot allowed the team to detect patterns in the features and designs that led users to experience feelings of regret.

Although academics can analyze objective passive sensing or donated platform data to provide proof-of-concept examples of PMU profiles, these profiles will likely be incomplete without access to internal platform data. Moreover, as platform designs change over time, profiles of problematic use will shift, which will require timely monitoring by platform trust and safety teams.

6 How PMU can be mitigated

We recognize that usage metrics, even when combined with user surveys or input, could lead to false negatives and positives in individual-level identification of PMU. However, when platforms use mitigation strategies to reduce rates of platform-specific signals of PMU across their whole sample of users, it will benefit both those users with

impaired functioning and those with more borderline or benign relationships with the platform.

As part of routine A/B testing that is traditionally used to identify which designs improve engagement, platforms could test mitigation strategies that help improve user autonomy and signals of well-being. These could include changes recommended in the federal interagency Task Force on Kids Online Health and Safety (Delphin-Rittmon and Davidson 2024), such as:

- providing options for availability of ephemeral content
- batching or muting notifications
- adding friction or nudges to disengage at important times of day (e.g., sleep, school)
- hiding social traces and quantification metrics by default
- providing options for algorithms that are not trained on engagement, or turning off feeds at certain times of day
- goal setting and self-determination designs

Teams developing parental controls or safety settings could also use PMU and well-being signals to test the effectiveness of their designs and publish this information in transparency reports. Minor users who do not wish to have autonomy-supportive designs could turn them off and opt for more permissive settings. However, much like the “curb-cut effect” and other examples of universal design (Owens and Lenhart 2025, Blackwell 2017), all users will benefit from designs that provide more self-determination and less manufactured pressure to engage. In essence, mitigating PMU among users who are struggling the most will improve the platform autonomy support available for all users.

The tech industry practice of optimizing for engagement has had widespread detrimental effects for people of all ages, including many children and teens. These harms are not evenly distributed and disproportionately impact those in the most vulnerable circumstances. PMU is more than just a problematic experience for individuals to be treated by medical professionals. It has the potential to be a detectable, objective signal that researchers and practitioners can leverage to evaluate platforms and identify the specific designs that leave users feeling exploited.

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