

# "Social Media Killed Our Generation": Teenagers' Felt Experiences of Harm on Social Media

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## Abstract

Social media platforms are deeply embedded in teenagers' daily lives, shaping their identities, relationships, and leisure time while introducing risks such as social pressure, harmful content, and addiction. While attention capture mechanisms and dark patterns are increasingly recognized as contributors to the harm these platforms perpetuate, teenagers' own experiences of harm remain underexplored. In this study, we report on analysis of eight interviews with participants aged 12–17, revealing how their desire to be a "normal teen" shapes their lives, how they experience and interpret harms, and how ecologies of use influence mitigation strategies. Our findings reveal that teenagers frequently attribute responsibility to themselves or other teens rather than the designed affordances of the platform. We contribute a detailed account of potential behavioral and attentional harms that further situates "what counts as harm" within contemporary technology governance debates, emphasizing the need for design alternatives that balance safety, agency, and meaningful engagement.

## CCS Concepts

• **Social and professional topics** → **Children**; • **Security and privacy** → **Social aspects of security and privacy**; • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Social media**; • **Software and its engineering** → **Software safety**.

## Keywords

harm, attention capture, social media, teenagers

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## 1 Introduction

Attention has become a currency [39], a commodity that the tech industry continuously competes to capture, exploit, and monetize [17, 51]. In recent years, whistleblowers like Frances Haugen [33] have exposed how platforms have consistently chosen to emphasize engagement over well-being, even when this prioritization heightens risks for young users. Activists have likewise pointed to the power imbalance between children and billion-dollar tech companies, where social media, apps, and games are designed with addictive features, showing little regard for childrens' well-being [8, 68]. For teenagers, whose daily routines are deeply intertwined with these platforms [40], the stakes are particularly high: social media platforms shape friendships, identities, and entertainment while simultaneously exposing them to social pressure, harmful content, and emotional distress [7, 14, 61]. As highlighted by recent World Health Organization data [77], problematic social media use among adolescents has been steadily rising, raising urgent concerns about its effects on young people's mental health and well-being. Given that adolescence is a formative stage for reflecting upon one's self-image and building emotional regulation capacity, it is a critical period for examining how design choices in social media directly affect their well-being. In the critical computing tradition, it is equally important to center teenagers' own voices in how they perceive and navigate these experiences [16].

Prior research shows the prevalence of dark patterns [47, 48] and attention-capture patterns [51] on social media platforms—and when triangulated with reports from whistleblowers such as Haugen, demonstrates that these harms are often built into the very structure of social media platforms, shaping how teens experience, navigate, and respond to risks in their daily digital lives. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has similarly highlighted the urgent need to address design choices that impact teenagers' online lives, recently holding a workshop where parents, child safety experts, and

government leaders discussed how “Big Tech” uses addictive features, weakens parental control, and fails to protect children, while exploring ways to keep kids safe in the digital world [4]. Drawing on Ackerman [5]’s concept of the “socio-technical gap,” described as the disconnect between what technology can support and what social practices require, it becomes evident that users’ real-world needs, behaviors, and norms are frequently overwhelmed by the attention-capture techniques embedded in technological systems. This gap aids scholars in exploring why individual features and collective experiences on social media produce harms relating to emotional distress, overuse, and reduced autonomy, even when platform components could have been designed to support healthy use.

We frame this paper as a way of exploring this gap further, seeking to understand the pluralistic experiences and users’ understandings of harm that are not simply a “mistake” or oversight; instead, we build upon prior work that shows technology not only enables harm by serving up content or facilitate online interactions, but can also actively induce it through specific design choices and metrics [21, 33, 51]. The ubiquity of these tactics often leads users to believe that their struggles with technology addiction stem from a lack of self-control or discipline, rather than from design induced harms [79]. In this paper, we focus on teen experiences on social media, including the role of addiction and compulsive use of these platforms [8, 51]. We situate our analysis within the broader context of the attention economy, seeking to more fully understand attention-related harms as they are experienced and framed by teens themselves. We conducted eight semi-structured interviews with teens living in the Midwest United States, exploring their lived experiences to develop a nuanced understanding of how harms manifest, how these harms might be mitigated, and how the harms or their outcomes are interpreted by our participants. Through reflexive thematic analysis [11], we iteratively constructed three overarching themes: *Being a ‘Normal’ Teen*, capturing how teenagers navigate social media and popular culture; *Felt Experiences and Othering of Harms* describing the consequences they perceive and the strategies they adopt in response; and *Social Media Ecologies Complicate Construction of Norms and Prevention of Harm*, highlighting the influence of parents, peers, educators, and platform design on their behaviors and expectations. This study is guided by the research question: *How do teenagers in the Midwest United States experience social media within their everyday social and technological environments, and how do they conceptualize harm in these contexts?*

Our contributions are twofold: first, we provide a novel account of what makes teen experiences on social media “normal,” describing how teens manage risk and respond to harms that relate to addiction and attention capture. Second, we situate the notion of “what counts as harm” within the broader context of platform affordances and technology governance, where platform narratives and design choices shape public and regulatory perceptions. By foregrounding teenagers’ experiences both individually and within their broader technology ecologies, we highlight how user experiences can better consider the need for platforms to take proactive and reactive steps to reduce the likelihood of harm.

## 2 Related Work

### 2.1 Teen and Childrens’ Use of Digital Platforms

There is growing evidence that platforms such as TikTok [38], Snapchat [35], and Facebook [76] expose young users to harms significant enough that some countries [58] have begun considering or implementing restrictions on social media use under the age of 16. Scholars have long noted that children and adolescents encounter digital platforms in ways that expose them to risks while also demanding active strategies of navigation. Fitton and colleagues show how free-to-play apps often rely on manipulative techniques that take advantage of younger audiences, leading them to develop the App Dark Design (ADD) framework to describe the temporal, monetary, social, and deceptive tactics embedded in these systems [24]. Their later work expands this perspective through the 4Cs framework—content, contact, conduct, and commerce—which provides a vocabulary for understanding how risks manifest across different dimensions of digital life [23]. Yet, as Radesky and Hiniker [57] highlights, identifying risks is only part of the story; too often the burden of managing risks is placed on parents and children, while platforms and policymakers escape accountability. In line with this distribution of responsibility, prior HCI work has proposed family-centered safety systems that support trust, negotiation, and shared decision-making between parents and children when navigating online risks [28]. A growing body of research suggests that manipulative design features such as infinite scrolling or bad defaults [32, 48] not only consume time and attention but also generate emotional distress, privacy concerns, and heightened social comparison for teens, who often lean on peers or family for support even as they struggle to resist peer pressure [7, 37, 46, 53, 61]. At the same time, studies with older users suggest that while social media can intensify feelings of fear of missing out (FoMO) and compulsive use, its links to broader mental health problems like loneliness or low self-esteem may be weaker than often assumed, with personality traits and the rise of short-form video platforms shaping these effects [44]. This suggests that it is important to not only consider *who* uses social media, but also the format and design of the technology itself—which together play an important role in how its risks and harms are experienced. These complexities have encouraged researchers to include adolescents more directly in the design process, ensuring that platforms are built not only to capture attention but also to prioritize safety and usability [56]. Lived experiences gathered from large-scale studies reinforce the urgency of this shift: while some teens celebrate the opportunities social media affords, many more describe harmful encounters, from cyberbullying and body shaming to privacy violations and distress triggered by resurfaced memories [7]. Earlier work on mobile technologies paints a similarly nuanced picture, suggesting that outcomes depend both on the technology itself and the vulnerabilities and relationships that shape its use [27]. In response, designers have begun to imagine new interventions—such as CHAITok, a prototype that grants children greater control over their data and fosters autonomy and resilience in online environments [75]. At the same time, cultural perspectives on privacy highlight how young people’s sense of safety online cannot be reduced to technical features alone, but must account for broader social values and practices

[25]. Importantly, children and families are not merely passive recipients of these risks; they experiment with regulation strategies such as limiting exposure, reframing use, and seeking support to make digital life more manageable [34].

## 2.2 Social Media as a Site for Teen Engagement

Social media platforms have become central to how teenagers connect, express themselves, and build relationships, but they are also designed in ways that foster compulsive use and attentional harms. High-level guidance, such as the 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's advisory [55], has highlighted the widespread and addictive nature of social media among youth. In parallel, whistleblowers like Frances Haugen [33] have exposed how platforms such as Meta explicitly prioritize engagement over well-being, even when this exacerbates risks for younger users. Research on dark patterns [30, 31] shows that these harms are not accidental but are built into the affordances of social networking services. For instance, studies identify manipulative tactics across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter that blur user autonomy, from engaging strategies like interactive hooks to governing strategies like labyrinthine navigation [47, 48]. Scholarship on attention capture deceptive designs further demonstrates how features such as infinite scroll and autoplay exploit psychological vulnerabilities, creating cycles of overuse that leave users feeling drained, regretful, and lacking in agency [51] (see also general strategies that designers exploit; [32]). For teenagers, who are still developing critical decision-making skills, these design strategies can be particularly difficult to resist, making it challenging to disengage or even delete accounts when platforms deliberately obscure these options [63]. At the same time, researchers have highlighted the emotional consequences of these design choices. Studies with both teens and adults show that passive consumption and viral engagement can trigger negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem, reinforcing cycles of use that are hard to escape [26]. Social media breaks, though sometimes helpful for relaxation and emotional regulation, can also encourage procrastination or compulsive scrolling depending on the format of engagement and user motivation [36]. These findings reinforce the idea that harm is not simply about how much time teens spend online, but about how the design of platforms structures their experiences. Still, not all platforms function in the same way: studies of BeReal, for example, suggest that straightforward designs emphasizing authenticity and limited interactivity can reduce some of the toxicity and pressure found on Instagram or TikTok, even while introducing new social norms and expectations [41].

HCI researchers have offered promising directions for change, showing that the addictive qualities of social media can be mitigated through design alternatives that amplify user agency and autonomy, such as through counter-measures or other interventions. Prototypes such as Lukoff's *SwitchTube* illustrate how adaptable commitment interfaces can restore user agency by allowing users to toggle between focus and exploration modes, shifting digital wellbeing tools away from rigid time restrictions toward flexible, intentional use [42, 43]. Other studies propose redesign strategies that make manipulative design patterns more visible to users, helping them understand why platforms feel so compelling and creating opportunities for more mindful use [49, 50]. Creative interventions,

such as *Weight of Scrolling*, further push the boundaries by making hidden digital behaviors tangible and social, encouraging reflection on the physical and emotional costs of platform use [52]. Prior research shows that while attention-capture design practices increase the risks of harm for teens, alternative design approaches can shift responsibility away from individual users and place it more appropriately on the platforms themselves to be accountable.

Platform affordances also shape how teens experience social media in ways that extend beyond single manipulative features. These affordances are the temporal and relational structures that determine what users can do, how they imagine their audiences, and how actions accumulate meaning across sessions. DeVito et al. [19] has demonstrated how affordances such as content persistence, identity persistence, and visibility control influence self-presentation and accountability over time. At the ecosystem level, users actively navigate different platforms' affordances to manage disclosure and identity, a strategy particularly evident among marginalized teens who move content across spaces to reduce risk [20]. Studies of the social media ecology further show that people weigh affordances across platforms when deciding where and how to share, treating platform features as part of a broader set of interaction possibilities rather than isolated tools [80]. Research on story and ephemeral features indicates that affordances around ephemerality and private responses can reduce performance pressure while simultaneously obscuring the possible reach of content [71]. More recently, theoretical work frames visibility as an object that platforms signal through design, shaping users' imagined audiences and experiences of exposure or risk [9]. Thus risk and pressure do not stem from single features alone but from affordances that unfold over time and across relationships, producing layered effects on teenagers' experience and responsibility. By shaping what actions feel possible, expected, and visible, platform affordances contribute to the layered nature of harm we observed, where teens carry emotional and social pressures that stem from design choices they rarely recognize as such.

## 2.3 Harm as a Legal and Phenomenological Construct

Harm is a complex and pluralistic concept shaped by societal values, legal frameworks, and platform governance, involving judgments about severity, consequences, and accountability [62]. Scholars have cautioned against reducing harm to narrow technical definitions, calling instead for approaches that map its complexities across social, legal, and technical domains [67]. Prior research has developed typologies and taxonomies to capture these nuances—including a typology of harm and severity [64], a taxonomy of cyber-harm [6], and a legally grounded harm taxonomy [62]. Harms are also entangled with related constructs like safety [74], online risk [23], trust [73], misinformation [66], and emerging threats like deepfakes [72] and virtual reality [65]. Following Ackerman [5], we recognize a persistent socio-technical gap: harms are both systemic and technical, while also grounded in lived experiences, requiring the perspectives of designers, researchers, users, and policymakers.

Research on digital harms increasingly emphasizes that the negative effects of platform design are multifaceted, extending beyond

immediately visible consequences to include both material and non-material harms. Santos et al. [62] propose a hierarchical taxonomy that organizes harms caused by dark patterns into low, meso, and high levels (building on the Gray et al. [32] ontology), highlighting how harms can be tangible or intangible, individual or collective. This framework underscores the need to not only identify clear, direct harms, such as financial loss or privacy breaches, but also subtler effects, such as loss of autonomy, cognitive burden, and attentional harm—many of which users may experience without fully realizing their impact. Recent regulatory actions such as the FTC settlement for USD \$245 million against Epic Games illustrate how manipulative interface design can lead children to make unintended purchases, highlighting both material and autonomy-related harms [2]. Similarly, analyses of Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) show that so-called “engagement prolonging designs”—including patterns such as infinite scroll, autoplay, confusing navigation, and social pressure actively shape teen behavior, increasing attention harm and limiting agency [14]. Reports from consumer organizations reinforce these concerns, documenting how online marketplaces and social media exploit addictive design elements to extend engagement and spending, often without adequate age verification or safeguards for minors [12]. Other research highlights the importance of examining harms from the perspective of lived experience. Teens have reported feeling emotionally drained, pressured to engage, or unable to disconnect from platforms, yet may not explicitly recognize the design mechanisms driving these outcomes. Concepts such as attention capture, interface interference, and cognitive burden provide a lens to connect these experiences to deliberate design choices [47, 48, 51, 63]. Privacy audits further reveal that harms extend into the data domain: platforms often share personal identifiers with third parties even for underage users, exposing adolescents to risks they cannot fully perceive or control [22]. In summary, harms from manipulative and attention-capture designs are complex and layered. They can be direct or indirect, visible or hidden, and experienced individually or collectively. Recognizing these multiple dimensions, and incorporating the voices and experiences of those affected, is crucial to understanding the true impact of digital platforms on teenagers and to guiding design, regulatory, and policy interventions that safeguard user well-being.

### 3 Method

To address our research question, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with teenagers aged 12 to 17 who reported some level of engagement with social media platforms, including, but not limited to Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube. Participant details are reported in Table 1<sup>1</sup>. Each interview was 45–60 minutes in duration, and we used the critical interview approach [13, 15] to explore participants’ experiences with social media. We chose the critical interview approach because this technique aids the researcher in understanding the meaning of a construct on the participant’s own terms. While methodologically similar to semi-structured interviews, critical interviews use follow-up questions to “deeply explore the ‘why’ behind what your participants tell you” [15] and allowed us as a research team to more fully describe

the values, norms, and judgments that shape how teenagers make sense of their experiences with social media. This approach supported deeper insight into how they understand harm, justify their choices, and interpret their daily interactions online. We structured the interview through three main topic domains, including: 1) experiences on social media and general patterns of use; 2) the harms and impacts of social media on their lives; and 3) coping strategies they report using to curtail or moderate their use of social media. This study was approved by our Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all teenagers assented and their parent or guardian consented to participate in the study. In the remainder of this section, we describe our recruitment and interviewing procedures and provide relevant information about our participants.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

We began our work by creating a draft interview protocol through an iterative process. To familiarize ourselves with the protocol and identify areas for improvement, we recruited two young adults, including a 22-year-old male and an 18-year-old female from the Midwest United States, through the research team’s personal networks to pilot the interview protocol. The feedback from these pilot interviews guided the revisions to content and scope of the final questionnaire and sensitized the research team towards different attitudes towards social media use. Participants for the full study were similarly recruited in the Midwest United States in a small “college town” of approximately 100,000 residents. This sampling approach was intentional, allowing us to focus on the lived experiences of teens in a context that has not been as well studied in prior work. The study was publicized through flyers and posters placed on campus, in the downtown area, at the public library, and in local coffee shops. We also used snowball sampling through the personal networks of one of the researchers. Prior to each interview, participants and their parents/guardians were provided with assent and consent forms, respectively, which were digitally signed. Before beginning the interview, we explained the study’s purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality, and obtained explicit permission to record the interview. All procedures adhered to the ethical guidelines and regulations of the affiliated institution. All participants were given a \$10 USD gift card as a token of appreciation for their time. We asked the teen’s parent or guardian to allow their teen to engage with our research team on Zoom and not to be present during the interview to allow the teen to answer honestly without parental interference. In one case (SM09), the parent chose to be present during the interview, which may have impacted their responses. In each interview, one member of the research team took the lead in asking questions, and 2-3 other team members listened to the responses and participated in a backchannel discussion, which served as a real-time “memo” of the interview and also impacted the types of questions that were asked. During the interviews, our goal was to create a space for teenagers to share their lived experiences with social media in an open and comfortable way. We wanted to hear how they described harmful moments in their own way, understand why those moments mattered to them, and identify instances of how they responded to or managed those situations. To understand our teenaged participants’ conceptions

<sup>1</sup>SM06 dropped out of the study, and thus there is a gap in the IDs we include in this table.

of harm, we used direct but flexible prompts in the second part of the interview. Questions such as “Tell me about a time when social media felt harmful” or “What do you think are the biggest problems with your use of social media” encouraged participants to describe specific moments and reflect on emotional, relational, and behavioral impacts. These questions led to responses that showed a wide range of concerns. For example, SM01 described having “*the normal concerns, like strangers*” reaching out on social media. SM04 talked about situations on Snapchat where people added users they did not know and sent inappropriate images. SM03 described times when someone felt they “*couldn't fit in*” because others were talking behind their back. These examples helped us understand how teenagers recognized, interpreted, and handled harmful experiences in their everyday social media use.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Our research team was comprised of six individuals, including the principal investigator, four PhD students, and one Master's student. The team first cleaned the data to anonymize the transcripts, assigning each participant an identifier (SM01 through SM08). We then conducted an initial round of open emotion coding [60] at both low and medium levels of inference to identify the emotions teenagers referenced or hinted towards when describing their social media experiences. *Low-inference* coding involved capturing emotions with minimal interpretation, relying primarily on participants' direct expressions and wording. *Medium-inference* coding extended beyond direct statements, relying on the research team's ability to interpret and categorize emotions based on contextual cues, non-verbal behaviors, and the overall tone of the narrative. This round of coding produced 96 emotion codes, such as *addiction (low level)*; *annoying (medium level)*; and *desire (low level)*. For instance, when SM01 shared, “*Well, all my friends had it; I just wanted to have it*” the research team coded the explicit expression of wanting the app as *desire (low inference)* and, based on contextual cues about peers' widespread use, interpreted the underlying emotion as *FOMO (medium inference)*. Similarly, when SM03 described feeling compelled to maintain Snapchat streaks to avoid disappointing others and to sustain social connections, as she says “*in the night I probably am scrolling through Instagram a lot and Snap... I always like had like a constant feeling that, oh my gosh, I can't lose this streak or like people will get mad at me because that's the one way I feel like I could keep connections with people too.*”, we coded this directly stated concern as *social pressure (low inference)* and, drawing on the participant's description of constant use and emotional pull, also applied the *medium-inference code addiction*. These examples illustrate how the team distinguished between participants' explicitly stated emotions and those inferred through context. During this process, we also coded the transcripts inductively, reflecting on both the structure of the overall interview and our primary research questions (structural coding) and other codes that appeared salient to our research goals (general open codes). We used this combination of coding strategies iteratively as we conducted the first four interviews, and then met to discuss our coding strategy, collaboratively building a research memo.

Based on the outcomes of the initial coding discussion, we created and applied 12 axial codes to the transcripts, focusing on the

*platforms teens used, their motivations to use social media, the harms they identified, and the coping mechanisms they developed or identified.* As we moved into axial coding and deepened our discussions, we began to see that participants' descriptions of harm or negative consequences were shaped by many internal and external factors. In several cases, what teens labeled as harm came from parental guidance or from social norms they felt they needed to follow. Underneath these explanations was also an idea of how a teenager should act in order to be seen as a “good” friend, a “normal” teen, or a likeable person. As our analysis continued, we found that teens often described harm in ways that distanced it from themselves, saying that these issues happened to their friends rather than to them. These early insights and the codes we developed encouraged us to think about teen conceptions of harm, the ecology in which teenagers act, and how these two constructs interact. This helped us see how being a teenager shapes their understanding of harm and how, together with other influences, this understanding affects who they hold responsible and how they choose to cope. Through iterative discussion and reflexive thematic analysis [11], we used these codes and early insights to construct a set of three themes that highlight teenagers' experiences with social media and the ways they made sense of popular culture (“Being a ‘Normal’ Teen”); the consequences they perceive and the factors that shape their understanding of potential harms and strategies they develop in response (“Felt Experiences and Othering of Harms”); and the role of different stakeholders that impacted their expectations and norms around social media use (“Social Media Ecologies Complicate Construction of Norms and Prevention of Harm”). Through writing and discussion, we iteratively constructed the final set of themes and sub-themes, building on both our early coding work and repeated review of transcripts as the sub-theme structure became more evident.

### 3.3 Researcher Positionality

In this study, we acknowledge our diverse positionalities as researchers and the ways in which our lived experiences, disciplinary backgrounds, and relationships to social media shaped our approach. We recognize our subjectivity as a resource rather than a limitation [29], both in framing the study and interpreting teenagers' accounts. Our team of 6 researchers brings expertise across education, law, cognitive science, design, and HCI, as well as cultural diversity spanning Asia, the Middle East, North, and South America. Several team members also share bilingual and cross-cultural backgrounds, which help us engage in defamiliarization with the Midwestern context of the study. Our team reflects diversity in age and gender, bringing together a range of perspectives and life experiences. Most of us are frequent social media users, providing a shared familiarity with the platforms and practices our participants described. Ritika has an academic and professional background in law and policy with experience in policy implementation. Colin also brings direct experience working with regulators and legal cases related to social media—including paid expert witness and consulting work on social media-related cases<sup>2</sup>—which informs our understanding of governance, accountability, and rights-based

<sup>2</sup>This expert witness work is completely independent from the study presented in this paper and did not shape its design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The study was conducted according to standard academic norms of independence.

ID	Age	Age of first use	Platforms Used
SM01	15	12–13	Snapchat
SM02	14 (almost 15)	12–13	TikTok, YouTube, Rednote
SM03	14 (almost 15)	10–11	TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitch, YouTube, WhatsApp
SM04	17	13	Snapchat, Instagram
SM05	16	9	Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, LinkedIn, Pinterest
SM07	14	10	Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Lemon8, Discord
SM08	14	8	Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube
SM09	16	8	YouTube (TikTok for 2 days)

**Table 1: Participant demographics and reported social media usage.**

dimensions of platform design. These combined perspectives, both insider familiarity with social media and outsider expertise in law and policy, inform how we interpret teenagers’ experiences of harm and reinforce our goal to center their voices in ongoing debates about platform governance and technology design.

## 4 Findings

Our findings show that teenagers’ social media use is defined by a tension between connection and compulsion, normalcy and pressure, autonomy and external control. Teens often described social media as inseparable from their everyday lives, a space where friendships are built, routines are maintained, and social participation is negotiated. Yet these same practices often came with obligations that felt like work, shaping how teens understood what it meant to be a “normal” teen. Alongside these everyday dynamics, participants reflected on the presence of harms, though often in complicated ways. Some recognized how social media use directly affected their mood, relationships, or safety, while others framed harm as something that happened to less careful or “other” users. Finally, teens situated their experiences within broader ecologies, including parents, schools, and platforms that sought to regulate or shape their use, but often left them feeling personally responsible for managing these risks. These findings highlight how social media simultaneously supports teenagers’ social worlds while burdening them with new pressures and responsibilities, revealing the layered negotiations of growing up in digitally mediated environments.

### 4.1 Being a “Normal” Teen

In this theme, we explore teens’ desire to be perceived as “normal” and their efforts to conform to the norms established by their peers that are reinforced or co-constructed through social media platform use. We address the pressure teenagers feel to meet these expectations, highlighting how deeply these platforms are woven into their daily lives. In doing so, this theme illustrates the development and performance of social media-based routines and the perceived impact of these platforms on teens’ behavior. As a framing for this sense of normalcy, we noted that participants in this study reported joining social media platforms at ages frequently well below the regulatory minimum of 13 years of age set by US COPPA [1] guidelines, with an average sign-up age of 11 years. This is consistent with other statistics from the US Surgeon General, which indicates that “nearly 40% of children ages 8–12 use social media” [55]. This

transparency, and peer review, and reports participants’ accounts as collected and analyzed through established qualitative methods.

early exposure highlights the relevance of examining how platform design and use shape teens’ experiences and behaviors on social media.

*4.1.1 “I Follow my Friends’ Lead”: Teens Learn through Their Peers How to Blend Social Media and Real Life.* Teens often reported relying on their peers to learn the norms of digital spaces and to determine which platforms are the most appropriate to use, encompassing social media behaviors that are primarily shaped by the norms their friends follow. This peer influence often begins with the decision to join a platform as a way of following their friends’ lead, as SM04 explained: *“I wanted to have social media because most of my friends did”*. Other norms include the types of content they engage with. SM03 pointed out *“...I post stuff based on what my other friends post or like,”* referencing communication behaviors or preferences such as whether they should delete or keep messages *“...based on what people told me ... because I just don’t want them to think I’m weird [for ...] saving streaks and stuff”* (SM03). These norms also create social expectations around follower-to-follower ratios, as participant SM03 shared that these dynamics are often discussed among peers: *“... why [are] more people following you than you are following them?”* and *“... who you’re following and who’s following you back”*. Age is another key factor shaping teens’ social media behavior, influencing which platforms they choose for communication. As SM01 explains, age differences can determine platform preferences when interacting with others; *“my older friends, seniors, prefer the iMessage and all the freshmen and sophomores like Snapchat.”*

In addition to social media platforms being a place where the norms of a teen’s peers are followed, they also serve as a site where teens’ everyday “in real life” social dynamics are reinforced and blended with their online practices. Teens reported that they mirror their daily social dynamics in the structural affordances of social media. Just as they have different friend groups in real life, they also create different groups online, structured based on varying levels of intimacy. For instance, SM01 and her friends use *“... friend accounts with maybe 500 people, and then they have like spam accounts<sup>3</sup> with your closest friends, and they’ve like 50, 100 people, and then they might have super private accounts.”* These structures help them to replicate their perception of group sizes and levels of authenticity in the real world, where they choose how to curate different content for different audiences. As SM05 explained, this often involves

<sup>3</sup>By “spam account,” this participant referred to a group of your friends you are comfortable sharing a large volume of communication with, using “spamming” to refer to frequency rather than poor quality.

using features like close friends lists or blocking options to control who sees particular posts. Participants also reflected their use of in-person social dynamics with more distant acquaintances on their social media accounts, describing a more liminal approach to engagement. For example, SM05 described how adding someone on social media was less about active communication and more about acknowledgment, noting that *"most of the time, we don't talk. It's just that we add each other. We kind of like each other's posts. It's just an acknowledgment that we're there."*

**4.1.2 Pressures to be "Normal".** Being a "normal" teen was closely intertwined with both peer influence and social media. From the very beginning, peer influence shapes online behavior, determining not only which platforms teens join but also how they use them. With this comes an implicit expectation that everyone should be on social media, where friendships are reinforced through features such as streaks, tags, and shared content. When asked about their initial motivation to join these platforms, SM08 explained that their reason for being on social media was to feel *"more of like [their] generation."* This expectation highlights how joining a social media platform is seen as a baseline for being normal—something teens do because *"all my friends had it"* (SM01). Even more skeptical teens give in after repeated nudges from their friends when made to feel a sense of FOMO, with SM03 describing a push to *"get Insta ... you're missing out."* In other cases, specific social strategies directly pushed teens to create accounts; SM09 described their experience, noting: *"I had TikTok for two days because my friends were telling [me], you should get TikTok so I can send you stuff"*. This example illustrates that being on the right apps is socially expected to maintain conversations with your friends, and even those teens who reported refraining from using a platform to consume content still stayed close to it to maintain conversation in order to avoid feeling left out, even resorting to *"[using] the feed on [their] friend's phones sometimes"*(SM01).

While most participants indicated that they felt social media was a necessity for staying in touch with others, some described the importance of social media in maintaining these connections as shifting from optional to obligatory, often using language that framed these interactions as a form of maintenance. As SM01 shares, *"I don't really like using it as much, and I don't want to text everyone through Snap. It's like kind of a chore now."* That sense of duty is also paired with an emotional cost—which SM03 concluded *"just gets me stressed out"*—showing how peer expectations and platform mechanics can quickly turn the need to be responsive and connected into routine work. The "chore and stress" pairing emerged when teens felt compelled to respond to maintain streaks, thereby avoiding disappointing friends. As reflected by SM03, they felt a *constant feeling that, oh my gosh, I can't lose this streak or like people will get mad at me,* highlighting how streaks transformed ordinary exchanges into pressured obligations. This compulsion, stemming from their fear of social drift, led teens to conduct quick check-ins on social media rather than engage in meaningful interactions. In short, staying in touch becomes a form of maintenance: a series of small tasks teens do to remain visible and included, even when it feels like a burden. Some teens, like SM09, chose to step back from certain platforms to avoid this pressure, noting that on apps like

Snapchat *"you're a little bit more pressured to talk to people than I normally do"*.

**4.1.3 Social Media as a Component of Mundane Teen Life.** Social media appeared as a routine, almost backgrounded part of everyday teen life, woven into the rhythms of school, transportation, and downtime. Many participants described using it during transitional moments, such as waiting for the bus or eating breakfast. SM03 noted they were *"probably on social media half the time"* while waiting, and SM04 similarly scrolled through Instagram or Snapchat before school. For others, mornings were too rushed, with SM05 admitting they skipped early TikTok use only because they *"wake up late,"* instead checking platforms during bus rides or breaks. After school, social media often served as a way to unwind as SM08 described their routine of heading home, grabbing snacks, and watching TikToks, while SM01 and SM02 used platforms more intermittently, mixing in texting, music, or online forum discussions with other after school activities. Even those less invested in social media still turned to their phones for idle moments. SM09, who distanced themselves from most platforms, still acknowledged using YouTube or messaging *"when I'm not really doing anything and I'm just waiting"*. These descriptions show how social media is woven into the background of teens' days, not necessarily dominating every moment, but consistently filling in the spaces in between.

For many teens, everyday choices about what to watch, buy, or try were shaped by social media, and all are also closely tied to the pressures and expectations of being a 'normal' teen. SM03 reflected that it helped them *"catch up on ... friends, but also sports or other content creators,"* while also admitting that *"social media made me actually care about things I shouldn't be caring about"* despite parents' warnings about being influenced. SM04 described moments of simply following along because *"[its] really cool, so I should do it too"* while also recalling their dad's advice about being susceptible to various influences at this age. SM05 similarly pointed to peer-driven trends, noting that *"my friends would do those little dance trends so when I heard about those I installed [the app]"*, and explained that they often search on TikTok or Instagram before buying something to see what others say. These reflections illustrate how social media both guides everyday decisions and amplifies pressures to belong, with SM05 exemplifying this through what they describe as an *"obsession"* with trending items, like their Stanley water bottle or UGG slippers, as they shared *"Everyone has it. I keep seeing it at school, everywhere. So I kind of want it"*.

## 4.2 Felt Experiences and Othering of Harms

In this theme, we illustrate how teens wrestled with perceptions of harm in their use of social media platforms, illustrating the ways in which they could reflect on harms in their own patterns of use and harms that only became salient or visible when they were potentially or actually experienced by others. Teenagers' understanding of what counts as harm was often shaped by parental guidance, social policing, and peer feedback. Many described early warnings from parents that became deeply ingrained rules for navigating online spaces. As SM01 explained, *"my parents really talked to me about the danger of strangers online when I was little. So it's like, set in my head [...]"*. Parental influence sometimes extended to restricting access to certain platforms, serving as an explicit warning about the

danger that these platforms were likely to promulgate. For instance, SM04 shared: “... my dad was like, actually, I don't want you to be on Instagram right now. I don't think it's safe.” Friends also played a role in reinforcing boundaries and prompting reflection on habits, such as SM08 recalling a moment when peers intervened after noticing excessive phone use from a member of their social group. These external cues, whether protective, restrictive, or corrective, shape teens' awareness and conception of potential harms.

**4.2.1 What Counts as Harm for Me? Teens' and Parents' Perspectives.** The teens we interviewed perceived harm on social media in multiple ways, ranging from unwanted interactions with strangers to exposure to misleading or inappropriate content. Many emphasized the dangers of connecting with unknown people, with SM01 repeating the common aphorism, “don't talk to strangers” while SM05 described being cautious about connecting with random contacts using Snapchat's Quick Add feature. Harmful interpersonal behaviors, such as trolling, negative comments, or bullying, were also salient; SM03 reflected on the stress of peers posting about others “it makes me feel upset, [...] did they actually do that to me?”. Emotional impacts, including mood shifts, feelings of inadequacy, or energy drain, were frequently shared by SM07 and SM08. Some of the teens were also made aware of age-specific concerns through parental framing of harm. SM04 described guidance from their father to avoid inappropriate content due to age when they warned them: “be careful ... it could be funny, but it can't be inappropriate”. Privacy risks, scams, and excessive screen time were additional concerns, with SM05 highlighting potential scams through random messages and SM08 noting physical effects such as headaches they experienced from prolonged use. Across these experiences, teens' understanding and conceptualization of harm was shaped both by personal experience and external guidance from parents, peers, and social norms, with a focus on the *potential* harm that other users or the content could cause *them*.

**4.2.2 “It Happens to Others, Not Me”: Understanding Harms by Proxy.** The teens we spoke with often framed harmful experiences on social media as both the fault of individual users and something that primarily happened to others, not themselves. Unsafe encounters were described as the result of careless decisions, and therefore avoidable through “common sense” strategies. For instance, SM01 explained that a friend who received inappropriate pictures had been “adding everyone she didn't know”, positioning the harm as irresponsible and avoidable behavior rather than a platform-level risk. Similarly, some participants minimized the complexity of online safety, suggesting it was “not that hard” to avoid strangers online (SM01), while SM05 downplayed a peer's experience by noting she was only “a little” careless in accepting a random Instagram request. At the same time, many participants distanced themselves from these risks, seeing them as problems for *others* rather than challenges in their own lives—demonstrating how they viewed harms through the proxy of others rather than recognizing harm in their own experiences. SM02, for example, described their own use of social media as largely positive, while acknowledging that “some people had negative effects from social media”. SM07 similarly pointed to a sibling's struggles, describing how “[my sister] spends way too much time ... my mom has to take her phone away”. In this way, teens articulated harm as something avoidable by exercising

better judgment while simultaneously placing responsibility onto peers, siblings, or friends. This dual framing, blaming the user and locating harm in others, reinforces their belief that responsibility lies with individuals rather than the social media platforms that shape their experiences.

**4.2.3 Teens Caught Between Control and Compulsion.** While the previous subtheme demonstrated how teens we talked with distanced themselves from experiences of harm, they also described a range of strategies they used to manage their social media use—actively seeking to protect themselves and others from potential harms. Many participants emphasized careful boundaries, such as adding only mutual connections and keeping accounts private to safeguard both their own and others' privacy and information (SM05, SM03). Participants also reported mindful sharing practices, such as avoiding posting real-time location or vacation details (SM05) and using pseudonyms instead of real names (SM02). In addition to these preventative strategies, teens engaged in active self-management, such as taking breaks from social media for hours or days (SM01, SM04) and using timers or lockboxes to prevent them from using their phone and allowing them to focus on offline tasks (SM01). Participants also reported coping with negative or disagreeable content by choosing to ignore it, viewing online opinions as harmless if not personally relevant (SM02, SM05). Finally, participants recognized social media's potentially addictive aspects, even if they did not articulate this as harm explicitly, noting that while some peers might struggle, they *themselves* felt capable of maintaining balance.

Despite these personal efforts to manage certain aspects of their social media experience, participants' accounts revealed how difficult it was for them to fully control their engagement on social media platforms. Many described a “pull” back to social media that felt irresistible despite their best intentions, in line with findings from the attention capture literature. SM04 shared “I just go back [...] it's just a good feeling”, highlighting the attentional and emotional draw of social media even when stepping away was theoretically possible. Similarly, SM05 admitted “I do stay on social media as much as I can throughout the day”, acknowledging frequent engagement despite awareness of potential downsides. Teens also frequently recognized these patterns indirectly without being able to indicate the root cause. SM03 noted “Social media made me actually care about things I shouldn't be caring about more”, while SM07 described comfort-seeking behaviors, such as watching videos to distract from negative emotions. These patterns of use sometimes carried with them a sense of helplessness, as SM05 explained: “some things are just out of your control [...] you just can't help it”. The broader generational impact was captured by SM08, who reflected that “social media really like, killed our generation basically”, highlighting how strongly these platforms shape their daily life. Our teen participants described their continuous push-and-pull with social media platforms, articulating strategies for control and self-management, while simultaneously acknowledging the compelling and often irresistible nature of these platforms—leaving them caught between an illusion of control and lived experiences of compulsion.

### 4.3 Social Media Ecologies Complicate Construction of Norms and Prevention of Harm

In this theme, we demonstrate how social media use is part of a teen's larger ecology of use—encompassing one's friend groups, parents, schools, and platforms. This ecological view reveals how different stakeholders impact teens' experience of social media platforms, shaping perceptions of harm and attempts at risk prevention. Teens situated their experiences within these broader ecologies that sought to regulate or influence their use, yet often feel personally responsible for managing associated risks.

**4.3.1 Social Relations Structure Teens' Connections to Social Media.** Teenagers' experiences with social media are shaped not only by peers but also by a broader ecology of stakeholders, including parents, schools, and the platforms themselves. Within this ecology, parents often play a dual role: guiding teens' use while also enforcing boundaries. For example, SM01 explained that they don't use their phone at night because "my parents take it every night. It's just [...] a rule," referencing early lessons about online safety where "my parents really talked to me about the danger of strangers online when I was little. So it's like, set in my head." Some teens followed parental guidance indirectly, either to avoid conflict or because they internalized safety standards: SM03 noted that they initially avoided social media because "my parents didn't want me to have it [and] I just didn't want to make them feel bad." Other participants described more flexible approaches. SM05 shared that their parents allowed exploration while providing guidance: "they let me explore it as I see [but] if some strangers try to talk to you, you should probably not do that". SM04 highlighted household rules around presence and attention rather than strict screen-time limits, saying that during family meals, "I cannot touch my phone at all [...] I have to be talking with them or I could watch something on TV, but I can't be on my phone." Meanwhile, SM08 described a balance between independence and parental concern: their mom "doesn't care if I like doing social medias but wants me to use them—like less time so that I don't get addicted." Teens appeared to respond not only to explicit rules, such as phone curfews or privacy restrictions, but also to subtler cues from parents about what is acceptable behavior online.

Schools represented another stakeholder that our participants were aware of, but teens often saw this authority as less legitimate. SM07 explained, "school doesn't have any rules, but if they do, I wouldn't... I wouldn't follow it because school doesn't have any justification to tell me what to do." At the same time, peer experiences show how frequently school contexts intersected with phone use, including communication among friend groups, planning for sports events, or discussions about classes. As one implication of this compulsive use of phones at school, SM09 noted the impact of classmates being distracted: "one of my friends would use their phone but then they would be confused on what happened in class. So then they ask me about it and I'd be like, you were right next to me and you were on your phone." This example highlights how peer dynamics can indirectly reinforce norms about attentiveness and responsible use.

Teens' social media use is embedded within a multi-stakeholder ecology where parents, schools, and peers all play a role in shaping norms and expectations. While parental rules establish boundaries, schools provide a contested arena of authority, and peers reinforce practices through daily interactions. Navigating this ecology requires teens to constantly balance autonomy, compliance, and negotiation, making their social media experiences inseparable from the broader social structures around them.

**4.3.2 Teens Feel They Must Work to Manage Risk and Prevent Harms.** Teens used a variety of strategies to prevent potential harm on social media, which we describe as 'managing risks'. They also shared how they responded when harm had already occurred, reflecting on consequences and ways to cope. In doing so, teens draw upon their own experience as well as considering or soliciting advice and experience from parents, friends, teachers, and others. For some, parental restrictions directly shaped their use: SM01 noted, "I am sure I would be on it so much more if I didn't have the restrictions and the nighttime taken". Others developed self-imposed rules based on what they had learned from peers, as SM02 explained: "I just used the experience I heard from other people and set up those guidelines for myself." Thus, risk management was not only about individual decisions but also about the influence of broader social ecologies.

Based on our analysis, we found that teens' strategies for managing risks fell into three categories: *proactive*, *reactive*, and *non reactive*:

- (1) **Proactive strategies:** focused on managing risk and were primarily centered around the domains of screen time, boundary setting, and managing new friend requests. From a young age, teens reported that they were taught to be mindful of the information that they make public on the internet. One of the most common proactive measures teens described enacting was setting personal boundaries to manage potential risk, such as SM02 discussing her careful approach to sharing personal information: "I would never share my last name because. Yeah, never do that", later emphasizing that she would "Never, never, never" share phone numbers with people they meet online. Similarly, SM05 shared that her parents cautioned her against disclosing real-time location while traveling, leading her to adopt the practice of only posting vacation updates "once they are done with the trip and [are] back home safe." Teens also proactively managed risks by carefully curating who had access to their online lives, often distinguishing between different levels of friendship. SM01 explained that "at first I just added my close friends, and then I added my, like, not close, but still friends", showing how decisions about who to connect with reflected the quality of the relationship. At the same time, participants emphasized relying on mutual friends as a form of protection, using these connections to filter who they added and to reduce the risk of their content reaching unintended audiences.
- (2) **Reactive strategies:** were instead focused on dealing with extant harms, including reducing or negating damage relating to exposure to harmful content or unwanted interactions with strangers. Many participants recalled their parents cautioning them about risky behaviors online—whether it was

interacting with strangers, responding to requests for personal information, or engaging with inappropriate content. Participants developed different reactive strategies to manage risk. SM05 would un-add people when they have received “weird text”, but for SM03, the main risk to manage was their own difficulty in staying away from the phone, which they addressed by “mute[ing] notifications” to reduce the urge to constantly check it. Similarly, SM01, who also struggles with managing screen time, relies on the Screen Time feature; although they find the notifications reminding them to take a break annoying, they still consider it a smart strategy. SM04, on the other hand, takes parental advice about age-inappropriate content seriously, noting, “it’s not the age or time for that. And I agree with it.” They aim to steer clear of such content and approach online information critically, recognizing that many messages reflect “fake standards [...] and these things are influencing.”

- (3) **Non-reactive strategies:** Some teens described situations where they chose not to actively intervene or respond to potentially harmful content, reflecting a sense of selective disengagement. SM01 explained this approach as “it’s not my life, it’s not my place”, highlighting a boundary between what they engage with and what they ignore. Similarly, SM02 described ignoring content or opinions they didn’t agree with “if you don’t like the post, just ignore it. If you don’t like the opinion, just ignore it.” For SM03, this strategy took the form of bypassing system-imposed limits by “ignor[ing] time limit”. Others were more selective about the people they blocked or avoided online. SM04 described their reaction if someone did something weird or something wrong: “just block [them]”. At the same time, some teens felt helpless, feeling that certain harms were beyond their control. As SM05 reflected, “some things are just out of your control even if you are as careful as you can be, no matter how well you use it some things will happen and you just can’t help it”. These non-reactive strategies demonstrate that teens sometimes manage risk by stepping back, setting personal boundaries, or believing that not all online harms can be prevented.

These examples highlight how teens actively balance participation and safety online, developing strategies that are often shaped by both parental guidance and personal experiences, as well as their friends. While teenagers have a complex ecology surrounding both their social media use and offline life, when they confront harms, they often act under the *influence* of their ecology but without their direct intervention. Our data highlights that even when teens described “othered” harms, there were no examples where teens collaborated to navigate those harms or risks; or as SM01 shared, “it is not my place” to tell a friend to watch her screen time. Teens often face perceived risks and harms through proactive, reactive, or nonreactive strategies, but this work appears to occur without interaction with other stakeholders outside of platforms and the affordances they provide to manage risk and harm.

**4.3.3 Platforms Are Largely An Absent Stakeholder in Risk Prevention.** Teens often see themselves as primarily responsible for managing risky behavior online, with little expectation that platforms will proactively seek to prevent harm. They rely on strategies

like blocking, deleting, or restricting who can view their content, making harm prevention feel like an individual duty rather than a shared responsibility. SM01 reflected on a friend who received inappropriate content, noting it was “pretty avoidable” because she had added people she didn’t know, and emphasized that staying safe is simple: “[i]t’s not that hard. Just like, don’t add strangers, don’t talk to strangers. You’ve known that since you were little.” At the same time, teens normalize harm as a mistake that happens; SM05 described a friend who “wasn’t too careful” but noted that it was fine, concluding “a lot of us do that.” These perspectives highlight a gap between teens’ proactive self-management of risk and the limited role they perceive platforms play in supporting safer online experiences. Teens also recognize the limits of the reactive strategies they have built to address platform harms and expressed frustration when platforms failed to act. For example, SM04 suggested stricter enforcement mechanisms for reporting harmful content, noting that on Snapchat “whenever people are reported, action should be taken,” but often “nothing is worked on that.” Teens described reporting as ineffective, with SM04 further pointing out that “action is not actually taken” and “nothing is happening”. SM09 suggested tools that would “automatically restrict harmful material from younger audiences” and called for “more flagging and more involvement from the platform to remove tensions between commenters and people posting.” SM08 imagined solutions that could automatically delete hateful comments so “people don’t get offended.” Platforms also fail to support teens in limiting their own use, making screen time alerts easy to bypass. As SM03 explained, stronger time limit enforcement is needed so it “would actually make not let you be on Insta after your reels would stop working” instead of offering an “ignore this time limit option.” These ideas remain modest compared to the proactive steps teens already take themselves, but they point toward gaps in current platform affordances—or in some cases, a lack of knowledge of existing functionality on social media platforms that might partially mitigate these threats but requires configuration. Notably, no teens described platforms as currently playing an active role in preventing risks, underscoring how limited their expectations are and how much space exists for platforms to do better in supporting the safety practices teens already value.

## 5 Discussion

Across the three themes we constructed, we have shown how teens’ relationship with social media platforms is complex, situated, and mediated by an ecology of stakeholders and platforms. Our findings illustrate how teens work to align their behaviors with peer norms, while also navigating the potential and actual experiences of harms that they often recognize more readily in others than in themselves. In this section, we build upon some of these key findings. First, we consider the role of teen agency as they seek to manage risks and respond to harms, recognizing a lack of awareness into their own developmental capacity that may allow teens to better manage others’ social media engagement than their own. Second, we problematize the relationship between norms and platform affordances, revealing the multi-dimensional nature of harm on social media that requires an ecological view to fully address. A conceptual diagram detailing these relationships is provided in Figure 1.

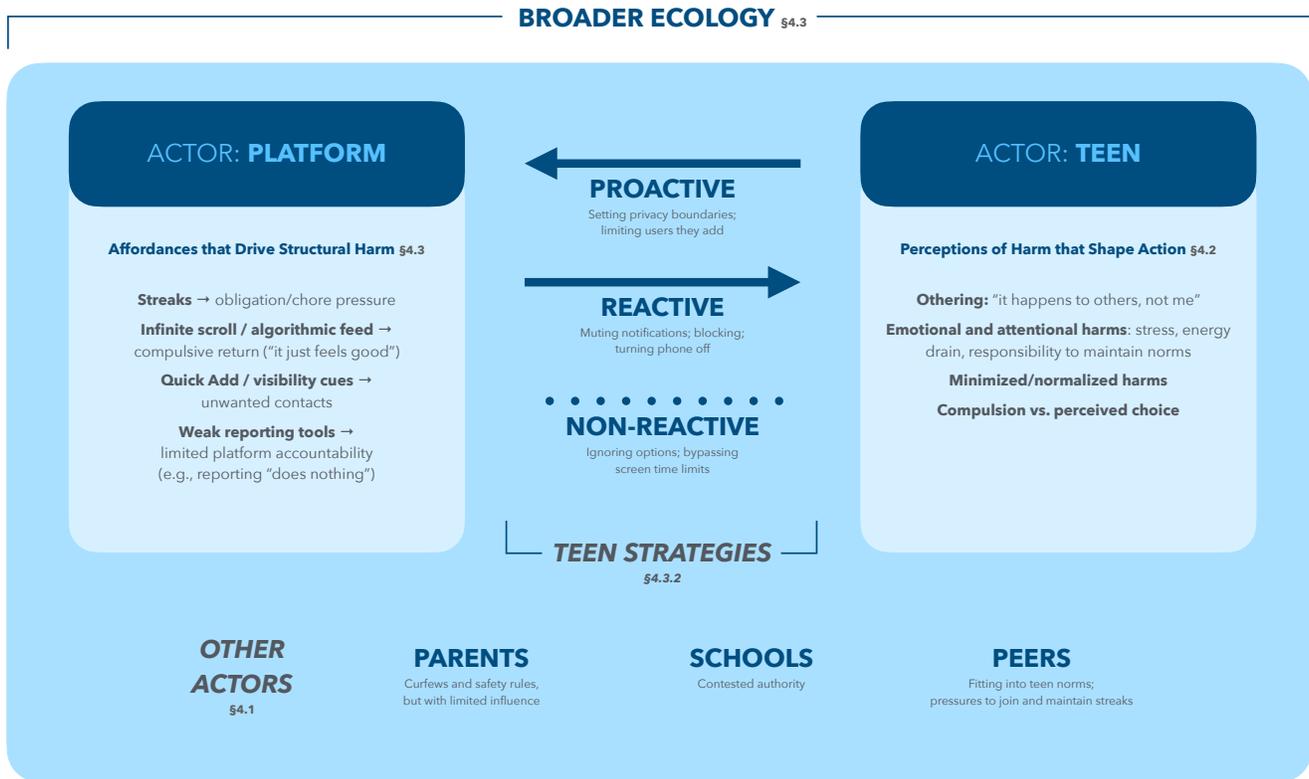


Figure 1: A conceptual map of our findings, including the relationship between teens and social media platforms, strategies teens used to engage with perceived harms, and other actors in the broader ecology.

### 5.1 I Know Better Than You: Between Distancing and Egotism

Our findings reveal a paradox in how teens conceptualize responsibility for safe and healthy social media use. On one hand, they positioned themselves as capable of managing risks, expressing confidence in their ability to set boundaries, ignore harmful content, or disengage from social media platforms when necessary. On the other hand, this confidence coexisted with accounts of compulsive use, reflected in phrases such as feeling they “*have to*” use social media, admitting that “*going back feels good*,” claiming the only reason they aren’t on a platform is because “*I’m not allowed to have it*,” or describing social media as a source of stress. Being a typical teenager also involves the urge to “rebel” against restrictions, which sometimes fuels their motivation to return to social media, expressed in sentiments like “*I did fight for to get social media so I kind of want it*” (SM05). These tensions, paired with reliance on strategies that were often ineffective or short-lived, suggest that teens’ sense of control is more aspirational than real or durable, highlighting a gap in how they perceive their agency and control impacts of their actual experiences on social media.

This tension was especially visible in the way participants evaluated others. Teens frequently called out peers for being careless, addicted, or too trusting, framing harmful outcomes as the result of poor individual judgment, normalizing harm as a consequence of

the user’s own negligence due to believing it was avoidable. By externalizing risk and harm to others, they distanced themselves from vulnerability and maintained a frequently egotistical self-image that framed them as being more discerning or responsible than their peers or friends. This dual positioning of overestimating their own agency while critiquing others reinforces their often repeated conception that safety is primarily or even solely the responsibility of the user. Within this framing, harm was understood by our teen participants as a failure of self-control rather than something that was intentionally shaped by the design of the platform. Because many teens believed harms were avoidable through careful attention to their interactions (e.g., ignoring unwanted content, dismissing social media trolls as “just opinions”), platform design was rendered less visible as a source of harm. The teens we spoke with also had an inflated sense of choice and self-control, reporting on peer norms such as pressure to maintain streaks, follow trends, or match peer behaviors that drive their engagement, but which they still frequently framed as a matter of personal choice. This focus on self-control, despite how fraught or unattainable it is for teens confronting billion-dollar platforms, frames harm as a matter of individual failure rather than structural design, masking how platform affordances and related incentive systems (e.g., [8, 21]) set teens up for addiction and exposure to harmful content and interactions.

Although teens often presented themselves as capable of managing social media risks, their confidence appears to frequently be misplaced. Shaped by parental guidance, peer norms, and social expectations, they overestimated their ability to control engagement and protect themselves from harm—reinforced by their tendency to see harms as primarily affecting others, which allowed them to externalize responsibility while underestimating structural influences. Meanwhile, platforms rarely provide meaningful support to scaffold safer behavior, leaving teens to shoulder risks largely on their own. These dynamics reveal that teens’ ‘I know better’ stance reflects a false sense of control, masking the complex ways that social, ecological, and platform-level factors shape their online experiences. Prior research highlights the importance of parental scaffolding, regulatory action, and consideration of the development of children’s metacognitive abilities when managing technology use [34, 57]. Ghosh et al. [28] have operationalized this scaffolding through family-centered safety designs, showing how trust, negotiation, and shared responsibility within parent–child relationships shape how children navigate online risk. Our findings show that focusing only on a teen’s agency without considering the impacts of platforms on social norms may risk ignoring the way that teens overestimate themselves and distance others’ perceived faults from their own vulnerabilities. For instance, platform features that rely on self-regulation, such as “take a break” nudges, assume that teens can and will exercise agency effectively. Yet if teens simultaneously underestimate their own susceptibility and overestimate their competence, such tools are likely to prove insufficient, while also making it appear that social media platforms are supporting user control and freedom. Building on these findings, future interventions by platforms or researchers could explore how to redirect the critical stance teens take toward others back onto themselves, transforming the “I know better” posture into an opportunity for reflection. Educational strategies that make teens’ implicit comparisons explicit, or platform affordances that encourage collective rather than individual responsibility, may offer pathways for more realistic and effective harm mitigation.

## 5.2 Social Media Harms Require a Multi-Dimensional Approach

Our findings provide new evidence that illustrates the multi-dimensionality of harm which is experienced through overlapping layers for teens on social media, encompassing technical affordances, social interactions, and emotional states. While platform harms are often framed in terms of user-generated behaviors (e.g., harassment, misinformation, explicit content), our findings highlight that many harms also emerge from the finely-tuned design choices of platforms themselves. For instance, platforms encourage users, particularly teens, to “start with the fun” of connecting with others and consuming content, yet engagement-driven design patterns quickly escalate into compulsive use that teens struggle to regulate. Participants described feeling pressured to remain active online to maintain social standing, “be a good friend” or “stay caught up,” even when these actions and norms conflicted with their own well-being. These dynamics link to broader debates around behavioral addiction [78] and platform governance [18]. This relates to vulnerability, a key characteristic that relates to the experience of harm that has been shown

to impact teens in different ways than other populations [59, 61]. Teens’ vulnerability is heightened by ongoing identity formation processes, awareness of and negotiation of social status, and susceptibility to the fear of missing out (FOMO). Our findings showed that teens often mirrored platform-promoted trends (e.g., TikTok challenges) without interrogating what they are reproducing or why, making them particularly sensitive to harmful or exploitative practices [10]. While parents and other adults often warn teens using simplified norms to engage on the platform in safe ways (e.g., “stranger danger”), such guidance does little to prepare them for platform-driven harms that arise not from interpersonal threats but from systemic design decisions.

Importantly, we found that emotions remain underrepresented by our teen participants as they discussed the potential for online harm. Although our participants described emotional turbulence—feeling excluded, anxious, pressured, or “*caring more than they needed to*”—these experiences were rarely problematized as harms in their own right. Teens were able to identify harm as a form of “blame” when evaluating their peers’ use of social media, but rarely were our participants able to then evaluate whether these harms could have been effectively mitigated. This tension also exists when comparing the subjective experiences of teens to the ways that platforms and regulators discuss harm. Platforms often use language that frames harm as tangible and measurable (e.g., exposure to illegal content), while emotional harms are described as “unintended outcomes” that happen to users in ways which cannot be anticipated in advance. And regulators are often only able to step in and provide additional oversight (e.g., the recent UK Online Safety Act [3]) once known harms have already been experienced by users. These mismatches raise critical questions for future research and policy: *How should emotional harms be recognized in trust and safety frameworks? What responsibilities should platforms bear in mitigating emotional consequences, rather than shifting the burden of safety onto users? And what platform affordances should be expanded or made more visible and legible?*

Further, it is essential to emphasize the responsibility of keeping children safe online. While well-intentioned legislation, such as Australia’s recent law banning social media access for those under 16 [58], seeks to protect young users, its translation into platform design often reduces compliance to a box-ticking exercise that teenagers can easily bypass. Internal documents revealed, for example, that Facebook knew Instagram worsened body image concerns and contributed to anxiety and depression among teen girls, yet failed to take meaningful action [76]. Likewise, Snap has been accused of neglecting to warn users about widespread sextortion risks, despite receiving thousands of reports each month [35]. TikTok has also drawn criticism for addictive design practices that scholars argue expose children to harm on an “industrial scale” [38]. These risks are further compounded by the ease with which teenagers circumvent age-verification systems [45]—confirmed in our findings that showed that all of our participants began using social media before the legal age of 13 [1]. With World Health Organization data [77] indicating that problematic social media use among adolescents rose from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022, it is evident that responsibility cannot rest on legislation alone but must extend to platforms themselves, which bear an important duty to design

systems that prioritize the safety and well-being of young users more intentionally.

## 6 Implications and Future Work

This study reflects a limited set of experiences drawn from the Global North, specifically the Midwest United States. Since the research was conducted in a “college town” that is more highly educated than the US average, participants may represent less diversity in terms of socioeconomic background, but many of the findings do appear consistent with the experiences outlined by Sanchez Chamorro et al. [61] who studied teenagers in Spain, demonstrating the potential transferability of at least portions of our findings. While this geographic and demographic specificity shapes the kinds of harms and safety practices participants described, it also offers a clear window into how teens in this particular sociotechnical context make sense of online harm. Following interpretivist approaches in HCI, and as noted by Soden et al. [69], the value of such work lies not in broad generalization but in articulating how meanings are produced through local contexts and lived experiences. Our analysis attends closely to these particularities, offering insight into how harm is understood within this setting while opening up concepts that may be useful in other contexts. Points of resonance with prior work, such as the findings of Sanchez Chamorro et al. [61], indicate that our findings may be theoretically or conceptually transferable in other contexts, and we encourage further work with other situated populations of teens elsewhere in the United States and in other parts of the world where social media norms and platforms may differ.

We asked participants how they envisioned safer social media, and they emphasized both stronger security controls and greater platform accountability. Suggestions included tools to track usage, stricter enforcement of reporting, enhanced privacy settings, and more effective moderation of harmful content. These insights highlight the need to balance individual agency with platform responsibility. Building on this, future work could engage teens directly through participatory workshops, inspired by Sánchez and colleagues [70], to explore how they envision safer platforms and to co-create tools that reflect their lived experiences. As we build on the multi-dimensional understanding of harm, future work should also engage designers to reflect on how design decisions introduce or amplify harms, analyze platform guidelines to uncover gaps between narrated and experienced harms, and support policymakers in grounding concepts like harm, trust, and safety in users' lived experience. Interdisciplinary collaboration is also needed to develop a vocabulary of harm that extends beyond what can be quantified, capturing its emotional and systemic dimensions.

As prior research [18] notes, platform narratives largely dictate which harms are rendered visible, often centering interpersonal harms while sidelining platform accountability. Proactive moderation tools and educational resources tend to emphasize individual responsibility [54], subtly shifting accountability away from platforms and onto users. This asymmetry underscores the need for a governance model that recognizes harms not only as technical violations but also as an emotional experience. Our findings reinforce the need to move beyond this asymmetry toward governance models that recognize harm not only as a technical violation but

also as an emotional and systemic experience—one that requires shared accountability across platforms, policymakers, designers, and users. Our findings also highlight the need to ensure that new legislation results in meaningful and durable design changes rather than superficial compliance, such as the defective age verification features currently used by social media platforms in the US. Future research could evaluate how platforms implement “safety by design” in practice, attending to both benefits and harms through an ecological perspective.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, we report on our analysis of eight interviews with teen users in the Midwest US. Our findings show the layered and often contradictory ways teens experience social media, both as a vital space for connection and as a source of pressure, compulsion, and harm. By situating teens' practices within broader ecologies of peers, parents, schools, and platforms, we show that responsibility for safety is unevenly distributed, with teens often overestimating their own agency while failing to recognize the accountability of platforms. Based on our findings that show that harm is multi-dimensional, with both emotional and systemic components, we underscore the need for design, policy, and research approaches that move beyond individual responsibility towards shared accountability in creating safer digital environments for teens.

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