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Our Changing Relationship with Social Media

A Global Study

A Kaspersky Report
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Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic highlighted how important social media is for many of us to stay connected with friends, family and influencers. However, for all its many benefits, social media can come with a cost. The 2020 Netflix movie *The Social Dilemma* highlighted just how social media giants are collecting and using their users' data. It also demonstrated how addictive social media can be.

At Kaspersky, we wanted to understand **how people are engaging on social media** after a year of local and national lockdowns. We wanted to learn more about how our relationship has changed with our social media contacts, and our family and friends, and how we have been interacting with influencers.

We also wanted to gauge the mood around how people feel about social media and their mental health, and how much they understand about how to enjoy social media in a secure and safe way.

We teamed up with **Opinium Research** to survey more than **15,000 people from 25 countries** across the world. What emerges is a fascinating picture of how we use social media today, how we feel close to those people we have only ever met in pixelated form, and how we think about – or worse still, do not even consider – the consequences of what we share online.

53%

of people are using social media more than they were before the pandemic

71%

of people aged 18–34 rely on social media to feel connected

47%

say influencers provide them with 'an escape from reality'

63%

can recall a news story on the negative effects of social media on data privacy

33%

of people say they have become less tolerant of people on social media during the pandemic



Executive summary

Social media has provided a critical connection for many people around the world during lockdowns. Kaspersky finds that more than half (53%) of the social media users surveyed from around the world have used social channels more during global and lockdowns than before the pandemic struck. Young people, in particular, have found social media absolutely crucial to feel connected.

However, for all its positives, there is a flipside to social media. How people behave on social channels and how the owners of those channels use our data are cause for concern. Nearly two thirds (63%) of people say they can recall a news story around the negative effects of social media on data privacy. Among younger users aged 18–34, more than half (52%) know someone whose personal data has been compromised.

In addition, a third of people (33%) say they know someone personally who has been bullied on social media. We also observe friction around how people post on social networks, with a third (33%) of people reporting that they have become 'less tolerant' of other social media users during lockdown.

Although more than half (56%) of people have been active on social media for more than a decade, many of us are still figuring out how to balance the positives of social media with the negatives. In this report, we dive into the data and explore what the insights tell us about social media in 2021, how we use it, how it affects us and our relationships – both positively and negatively – and what this means for the future of human connectivity.



David Emm
Principal Security
Researcher for Kaspersky

The rise of 'parasocial relationships'

A key observation is that many of us are forming virtual one-way – or 'parasocial' – relationships with influencers. Just less than half (47%) of social media users believe that the influencers they follow provide them with 'an escape from reality'. More than one in five (21%) believes they 'could be friends' with those influencers. Online influencers are so engrained in our everyday lives that nearly a quarter (23%) say they are 'dependent' on influencer content. One in ten (10%) even say they feel a sense of absence if they do not engage with influencers.

Social media users' most common engagement with influencers is via commenting on their posts, which nearly one in four (37%) do, or by reacting to their posts or stories (37%). More than one in five (22%) have sent a private message to an influencer.

Influencers play an incredibly significant role in people's lives and their decision-making; more than seven in ten (71%) say they learn from the influencers they follow in areas including health, hobbies, style and news. Sometimes these virtual interactions cross over into the real world, with more than a third (34%) of social media users saying they have met an influencer they follow in real life. In the US, this figure rises to 57% while in the UK, less than a quarter of people (24%) are likely to meet the influencers they follow.

23%
of social media users
are 'dependent' on
influencer content

"We've moved into a new era where virtual relationships are becoming the norm. These one-sided relationships can often lead to oversharing on social media, as people look to develop or mimic these relationships.

However, this can lead to a huge range of negative and unforeseen consequences – hacking and phishing attempts, doxing and bullying, online shaming – the list goes on. It is understandable with the lockdowns we've all experienced over the past year that people will have gravitated towards online and parasocial relationships to stave off loneliness and boredom, but it's crucial that people remember that what they see on an influencers feed isn't necessarily genuine, so reality checking is required."

David Emm

Principal Security Researcher, Kaspersky

Protecting our personal data

Nearly one in four (38%) of social media users say they know someone personally who has experienced a data compromise while using social media. For those aged between 18–34, this figure rises to more than half (52%). Seven per cent of users worldwide say they have been victims of fraud via social media.

While more than half (56%) of social media users worldwide have been using a social network for more than a decade, nearly one in five (18%) say they do not know anything about the way social media companies use their data. This rises to 27% among those aged 55 and above.

Three in ten (30%) social media users worldwide mistrust social media giants, while just seven per cent have complete trust in those organisations. People in the UK are the most sceptical towards the social media giants, with nearly half (47%) say they do not trust them at all, compared to 21% in Germany and 17% in Italy.

30%
of people do not trust
social media giants

“It’s staggering that more than half of social media users know someone whose personal data has been compromised on social media. This underlines how important it is for everyone to understand how to protect themselves on social media, from privacy settings through to what they choose to share online about themselves. In addition, our personal data is more valuable than ever before to social media companies competing for ad dollars. Social media users need to understand how their data is used and their rights around protecting it.”

David Emm
Principal Security Researcher, Kaspersky

Regretting our social media posts

In June 2021, singer Billie Eilish apologised after footage recorded when she was in her early teens surfaced on TikTok and appeared to show her using a racial slur and mocking non-English-speakers' accents. The issue highlighted how what is put out on social media – however long ago it was created – can have long-lasting implications on users' personal and professional lives.*

Around one in eight (13%) of social media users admit to having used bad or offensive language on their social media or shared a post containing such language. This figure nearly doubles in the US (22%) and Australia (25%). More than one in ten (12%) social media users worldwide say they have expressed a political viewpoint they later regretted while more than one in five (22%) have expressed an emotional viewpoint they came to regret. This rises to nearly one in three (29%) people aged 18–34.

For some, there have been serious repercussions for their – or others' – social posts. Nearly one in six (16%) have fallen out with someone close to them over comments shared online.

While most people say they consider the implications on their family (58%) and friends (55%) before they share something on social media, more than four in ten (43%) do not consider the consequences of their posts on their current and potential future employers. As a result, three per cent of social media users worldwide have either lost their job or been disciplined at work over their posts.

3%
of social media users
have been disciplined
or sacked from their
workplace for a post

“What our findings demonstrate is that it’s so important to think before you post. You may really want to share something but how will other people perceive it? It is better not to post something than risk division or compromise your position at work. Everyone needs to treat other people with respect on social media as they would in real life, and that often gets lost when we’re online and can’t see how other people respond to what we are saying.”

David Emm
Principal Security Researcher, Kaspersky



*www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-57564878

Anti-social media drives people apart

A fifth (20%) of social media users around the world report that they have suffered from bullying on social platform. Among 18–34-year-olds, this figure rises to almost a third (31%). Social media users in Germany (31%) and Turkey (24%) are most likely to have suffered bullying on social, while Reddit (44%) and Twitch (41%) are the social sites where users are most likely to report having been bullied. Of those who report being bullied, the most likely format is via private message (38%), followed by comments on their photos (31%).

Of those users who report being bullied, three in ten (31%) knew the bully personally while 39% had been attacked by users they do not know.

Almost a half (47%) managed to stop the bullying successfully by responding directly, although a quarter (26%) found that responding made the situation worse.

Social media 'addiction'

Despite the apparent negative experience and a widespread lack of trust towards the social networks, we're still glued to our screens, and with just cause - there are a lot of benefits to social interaction online. Globally, users spend around 1.8 hours on Facebook and 1.6 hours on Instagram every day. TikTok users spend an average of 1.9 hours on the app, rising to 2.3 hours per day for 18–34-year-olds. Four per cent of TikTok users spend between seven to eight hours a day on the app! In comparison, around one in ten (11%) of Facebook users are on the site for between four to six hours each day.

When describing how they feel when using social media, more than half (56%) report feeling 'entertained', with a third (36%) saying they feel 'connected'. Overall, people are twice as likely to say that social media is a net positive (41%) for society and politics than negative (19%).

Social media is certainly proving divisive. A third (33%) of people worldwide say they have become 'less tolerant' of people on social media during the pandemic, with Turkey (45%), Germany (40%) and Italy (39%) leading the way in Europe. In addition, almost a quarter (23%) of young people (18–34-year-olds) have fallen out with someone over a social media post. One in ten (10%) has even ended a relationship on social media!

20%
of social media users
say they have been
bullied online

However, two thirds of global users say that they have seen news stories on the potential negative effects of social media on mental health and wellbeing. In response to these stories, seven in ten (70%) say they have changed the way they use the platforms. Nearly four in ten (38%) have reduced the time they spend on social media and a quarter (26%) check their accounts less often. One in eight (13%) have gone all the way and deleted or deactivated their account altogether.

11%
of Facebook users
spend between 4–6
hours a day on the
platform

"There's never any excuse for bullying – offline or online. Pressure is building for the networks to take action, but everyone has a responsibility to act respectfully when they are active on social media."

David Emm
Principal Security Researcher,
Kaspersky

"Despite the apparent mistrust and negativity around social platforms, it's clear that we're still addicted to the upsides of social media. For some people, reading negative stories perhaps combined with their own experiences has led them to dial back their social media activity, but others continue regardless. It's all about finding the right balance."

David Emm
Principal Security Researcher,
Kaspersky

Country-by-country breakdown and analysis

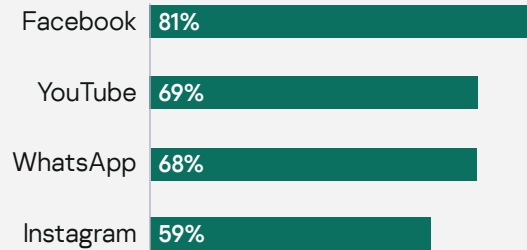
How people use – and feel about – social media varies significantly across the world. More than one in five (22%) have expressed an emotional viewpoint on social media that they have later regretted, something which is most prominent in Latin American countries, South Africa and Turkey. Australians (22%) are twice as likely to have posted something on social media while they were drunk or under the influence of alcohol that they later regretted than the global average (11%).

Vietnam is something of an outlier on several fronts. The Vietnamese are most likely to comment on Facebook more than once a day (64%), compared to the global average of just 36%. More than eight in ten (82%) Vietnamese social media users follow influencers, compared to the global average of 44% and the least likely, the Dutch (24%). Also, 17% of Vietnamese people have ended a relationship over social media – the highest in the world – and are the most likely to say they have experienced cyberbullying (17%). Japan, in contrast, is where the least amount of cyberbullying is reported (just two percent) and where people are least likely to end a relationship over social media (four per cent).

Brazilians (41%) are most likely to have changed their view of someone because of their views, followed closely by Turkish social media users (40%) and Argentinians (38%). While the same percentage of men and women (16%) admit to having posted something on social media while on the toilet, South Africans are the most prolific globally at 37%.

South Africans (83%) are most likely to say that they would find it annoying if their partner actively chatted to someone over social media during a date, followed by Italians (72%), Australians (71%) and Brits (70%). The global average is 59%.

Most actively used sites



Conclusion

The consensus we observe from surveying a wide range of people around the world is that the positive experiences of social media far outweigh the negatives. The connectivity offered by social media is so valuable to many people, especially those under 34 years of age. The global pandemic has driven an even deeper need for connectivity for many people, especially with influencers who provide a positive experience through their engaging and informative content.

As with any online activity where our data is at stake, it's essential that people understand how to protect their personally identifiable data. Our study indicates that most people still do not understand how their data is used on social media and, in the worst-case scenario, this can mean a data compromise that could cost money, time and cause a lot of stress.

Kaspersky has put together its ShareAware Hub to help people understand how to best protect themselves while enjoying social media safely. For more information, visit kaspersky.com/blog/shareaware-hub.



About the study

The fieldwork was conducted by Opinium Research between 18–31 May 2021. Opinium canvassed 15,682 adults in 25 countries, including UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Netherlands, Chile, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Japan, Russia, Turkey, USA, Czech Republic, Hungary, South Africa, Austria, Singapore, Vietnam, Australia and UAE.

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