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Monopolized Minds: The Mental Health Effects of Social Media Power Concentration on Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube dominate digital communication and information sharing in the United States. These companies often function as monopolies, exerting disproportionate market control and influencing public behavior. This paper presents a conceptual analysis drawing from scholarly literature, policy reports, and news sources to explore the relationship between social media dominance and monopolistic practices. We examine patterns in consumer manipulation and corporate consolidation. Findings from our review indicate that social media firms achieve monopoly-like status through aggressive acquisitions, platform integration, and algorithmic control. Despite claims of transparency, users often remain unaware of how their behaviors and data support these dominant structures. Social media monopolies raise serious concerns about consumer autonomy, market competition, and data ethics. This paper highlights the need for regulatory reform, increased public awareness, and accountability to mitigate the hidden costs of digital platform dominance.

Keywords: *social media, monopolies, consumers, mental health*

1. Social Media Usage

Social media usage is increasing by the second. Popular social media networking sites include Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, and YouTube. In 2015, 90% of young adults in the United States (U.S.), ages 18-24 years old, regularly used social media. A year later, this percentage grew to 97.5%. Furthermore, in 2016, the top five sites regular users went on were Tumblr (85.5%), Vine (84.6%), Snapchat (81.7%), Instagram (80.7%), and LinkedIn (78.9%), followed by Google+ (78.5%), Facebook (78.5%), Twitter (78.1%), Pinterest (72%), and YouTube (56.0%) (Villanti et al., 2017). In 2016, 79% of U.S. adults on social media used Facebook, 32% used Instagram, 31% used Pinterest, 29% used LinkedIn, and 25% used Twitter (Greenwood et al., 2016). By 2018, these figures had shifted, with 68% of adults using Facebook, 35% using Instagram, 29% using Pinterest, 27% using Snapchat, 25% using LinkedIn, and 24% using Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

According to Smith & Anderson (2018), U.S. adults use social media several times daily; of those who used it multiple times per day, 51% visited Facebook, 49% visited Snapchat, 38% visited Instagram, 29% visited YouTube, and 26% visited Twitter. Once a day, 23% of U.S. adults logged into Facebook, 22% logged into Instagram, 20% logged into Twitter, 17% logged into YouTube, and 14% logged into Snapchat. Smith & Anderson's (2018) survey also included a "less often" category, which reported the percentage of U.S. adults who only used these sites a few times a week, every few weeks, or less. They found that 26% visited Facebook less often, compared to 36% for Snapchat, 39% for Instagram, 53% for Twitter, and 55% for YouTube (Smith & Anderson, 2018). The percentage of U.S. adults utilizing social media has increased; for instance, Pew Research Center reported that in 2021, it is used by 72% of U.S. adults.

Perrin (2015) further contextualized the previously mentioned statistics through a breakdown of social media by age. He reported that 90% of 18–24-year-olds use social media, followed by 30–49-year-olds at 77%, 50–64-year-olds at 51%, and individuals 65 and over at 35% (Perrin, 2015). A more detailed breakdown of social media statistics by age group in 2018 reveals that among 18–24-year-olds, 94% used YouTube, 80% used Facebook, 78% used Snapchat, 71% used Instagram, and 45% used Twitter. Among 25-29-year-olds, 88% used YouTube, 80% used Facebook, 54% used Snapchat, 54% used Instagram, and 34% used Twitter. Among 30–49-year-olds, 88% used YouTube, 78% used Facebook, 40% used Instagram, 38% used Snapchat, and 38% used Twitter. Lastly, among 50-64-year-olds, 54% used YouTube, 55% used Facebook, 7% used Snapchat, 16% used Instagram, and 14% used Twitter (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Research also found that income levels influenced how often individuals used social media, revealing that social media usage was higher among high-income adults than among adults with low incomes. For instance, in 2015, 78% of adults with an income of $75k+ used social media, whereas only 56% of adults with an income under $30k a year used it (Perrin, 2015). Social media usage did not differ significantly by gender, as 68% of women and 62% of men utilized social media in 2015 (Perrin, 2015). Further information on how social media usage statistics vary by gender, income, and year can be found in Pew Research Center (2024).

2. Public Uses of Social Media

Social media can be a great communication tool and a resource during global emergency situations. Emergency responders, government officials, and non-government officials are utilizing social media to publicly communicate information during disasters and to support disaster management (Simon et al., 2015). Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the most used sites for the collection and dissemination of health-related information among disaster teams(Cohen, 2013; Sarcevic et al., 2012; Simon et al., 2015). Individuals in the community can easily share emergency information with friends, family, and other online users through these sites. Virtual communication can also help individuals connect with others who have similar needs and concerns related to their geographical communities (Shklovski et al., 2008). Because it is impossible for large amounts of information to reach billions of people via call or email, social media platforms are ideal for dispersing emergency information, in real time, to large crowds. For example, Facebook can upload 300 million photos and absorb 2.5. billion pieces of content (Constine, 2012) and Twitter, the most popular for use and extracting information, housing over 400 million daily tweets and 140 million active users (Farber, 2012; Simon et al., 2015). Therefore, social media sites can be beneficial platforms because they can provide emergency and health information. They are especially valuable for young adults, particularly 18-24-year-olds, who may not consistently receive accurate information on health and disease prevention (Villanti et al., 2017).

Recent studies have shifted their focus to social media outlets such as Twitter to derive data on current public opinion about social and political issues and to explore advocacy efforts within these domains (Ahmed et al., 2019; Tadros et al., 2024; Tadros et al., 2025). Further research is needed to examine the reliability and validity of Twitter and other social media sites as a data source as well as possible environmental and contextual influences on users' social media posts.

3. Monopolies

Monopolies are traditionally understood as single producers who hold a large portion of market concentration of a good or service, which often results in the exploitation of consumers and intense price gouging (Federal Trade Commission [FTC], n.d.). This widely accepted definition has led the typical consumer to feel that he or she is protected

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under established antitrust laws and natural price competition. Recent large-scale mergers and the development of prominent monopolies have been particularly evident in the technology and social media industries (Allyn et al., 2020; Bond, 2021). Despite widespread news coverage and apparent "transparency," consumers lack awareness of the extent to which they are manipulated and the role they play in the endorsement and success of these firms. Because the internet is a novelty and property rights are difficult to define and understand, most consumers have yet to fully realize the value of their information, which social media companies obtain and use for profit (Fischer, 2021). To understand the state of contemporary monopolies in emerging technology industries, it is vital to analyze and understand historical monopolies and the precedents they set.

Monopolies are firms that make up a large amount of market concentration and often are able to exploit this power concentration by raising prices (FTC, n.d.). Conglomerates form when a firm expands and gains significant market concentration across various, unrelated industries (Walton & Rockoff, 2018). After Seneca Oil Company completed the first drilled oil well, the oil industry was perceived as a promising opportunity. Standard Oil was founded when John D. Rockefeller pursued control over the refining process of oil, as its variable costs were lower than those in oil exploration and drilling. This company's outlook was promising at the time because there was a lack of producers in the oil refining market. Furthermore, due to Rockefeller's investments in research and development that fixated on removing oil impurities, Standard Oil was able to use oil that was otherwise considered "sour" and unusable to other firms (Burclaff, 2020). Rockefeller's partnerships across the industry also contributed to the establishment of the Standard Oil Company.

By the end of the 1880s, Standard Oil owned or leased 90% of the national oil refining capacity, partly due to trust agreements in 1882, in which three trustees were enlisted to manage the properties of the company for the benefit of its stockholders (Burclaff, 2020). A shocking 700,000 trust certificates were issued, and the company became worth $70 million, which is equivalent to $9.5 billion in today's valuation (Walton & Rockoff, 2018). However, in 1911, the government found that Standard Oil violated the Sherman Antitrust Act, and as a result, the monopoly was broken into 34 independent companies. Unexpectedly, these split companies still developed into integrated oil companies that grew to dominate the market themselves. Furthermore, Rockefeller grew increasingly wealthy despite these government interventions. For instance, in 1937, his total assets made up 1.5% of the country's economic output (Burclaff, 2020). Therefore, even with the implementation of these policies, powerful firms still emerged that remain powerful in the oil industry today.

American Tobacco is another prominent example of a historical monopoly. They utilized technology that allowed them to reap the benefits of economies of scale, such as the Bonsack machine, which was able to produce cigarettes with a continuous-flow technology and minimize costs (Porter, 1969). Furthermore, for monopolies to increase profits, they restrict outputs and raise prices to manipulate market behavior (FTC, n.d.). These tactics allowed American Tobacco to absorb roughly 250 separate companies, which, in turn, enabled them to dominate the cigarette industry. This monopoly was powerful and consumed the majority of the market share of various tobacco products. For example, American Tobacco produced 80% of cigarettes, plug tobacco, smoking tobacco, and snuff in the United States (Porter, 1969). Like Standard Oil, the Sherman Antitrust Act heavily impacted the developing monopoly and inhibited further firm acquisitions and price increases. In 1911, the American Tobacco company broke up into four smaller firms, but each continued to regain control of market shares over time, much like the smaller companies that came out of the breakup of Standard Oil (Levy et al., 2019).

The public regarded Standard Oil and American Tobacco as the "archetypes" of monopolies. The Supreme Court used the application of antitrust legislation to these monopolies to set precedent for how monopolies and largescale mergers should be handled and broken up. In fact, these two companies were the only cases of company dissolution that occurred with the intention to ease entry barriers and resolve uneven market concentration (Walton & Rockoff, 2018). Ultimately, the historical precedent set by these two large-scale breakups of monopolies continues to apply to the modern legal context. As new companies emerge in the latest industries, people begin to call into question the relevance of antitrust legislation and the impact these possible monopolies may have on the consumer and the economy (Fischer, 2021).

Recent antitrust lawsuits involving technology and social media companies have surfaced, as people call into question the impact these big firms have on market entry and access to consumer information. Google, now made up of over 200 companies under the company name "Alphabet," is a prime example of how the Justice Department (DOJ) has recently

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enacted antitrust litigation. In a complaint, the DOJ alleged that the company gatekeeps the internet search engine market, arguing that Google has engaged in anticompetitive practices to preserve and expand its dominance in the markets for general search services, search advertising, and general search text advertising, key pillars of its business empire. (Allyn et al., 2020). An example of this is Google's acquisition of YouTube, a site on the internet that differs in purpose and structure from Google itself. Also worth noting is that Google makes up 80% of internet searches and 95% of searches on mobile devices (Allyn et al., 2020). With Google's high market concentrations and their alleged use of anticompetitive tactics to increase market entry barriers through merging, people have begun to consider whether Google is truly a monopoly and if the antitrust legislation can be applied to such a novel industry.

A vital part of Google's business model is their method of obtaining profit: data attainment and targeted advertising. Google obtains users' cookies through their internet devices and matches accordingly with specific advertising companies. Google collaborates with these advertisers to draw consumers towards products and services that they show interest in based on their cookies. The partnership between Google and these advertisements, along with Google sending this data out into the internet "ecosystem", results in advertisers returning money (Cyphers, 2020). Like the historical examples of monopolies, Standard Oil and American Tobacco, Google makes up a large market concentration of internet searches while also capitalizing on consumer demand to make a profit. However, legislation and penalization is strenuous due to differences in people's recognition of internet property rights, how harmful obtaining and utilizing people's data is, and whether Google truly infringes on the market of internet searches (Fischer, 2021).

Another modern example of a firm facing accusations of being a monopoly is Facebook (now called Meta). The company is prominent in the social media industry and has acquired other social media companies such as Instagram and WhatsApp. The FTC notes that Facebook imposed anticompetitive conditions on software developers. Furthermore, as acquisitions of rival social media companies occurred from 2010 to 2020, Facebook's share of time spent by U.S. social media users surpassed 80%, and its share of monthly users exceeded 65% (Bond, 2021). As more activity occurs within the social media industry, Facebook's market concentration on social networking usage and monthly utilizations increases.

Facebook's business model for obtaining profit is similar to Google, as it also provides users with targeted advertisement that are based on their internet activity and cookies. To support this model, Facebook sells ad space on its pages to provide tailored advertisements to its users. After WhatsApp and Instagram merged with Facebook, targeted advertisements spread to these sites, offering reason to suspect Facebook of overwhelming market concentration and extensive control over advertisement space across popular social media platforms (Pereira, 2024). While Google and Facebook capitalize on user data and activity, it still remains unclear if internet data is protected under property rights.

There are striking similarities between the historical monopolies broken up by the Sherman Antitrust Acts and the monopolies that have begun to emerge in the modern technology industries. The Sherman Antitrust Acts, and their enforcement in splitting up Standard Oil and American Tobacco, set the precedent for how to approach a company that is acquiring large market concentration shares and profiting at the expense of consumer privacy (Walton & Rockoff, 2018). Standard Oil owned or leased 90% of refined oil nationally and American Tobacco controlled 80% of tobacco product sales (Burclaff, 2020; Porter, 1969). Currently, Google has procured companies such as YouTube and dominates 80% of internet searches and 95% of mobile internet searches (Allyn et al., 2020). Similarly, Facebook has acquired Instagram and WhatsApp, social media users spend 80% of time on a Facebook platform, and 65% of monthly users of social media are under the Facebook umbrella (Bond, 2021). The overwhelming market share these companies have and their exploitation of vulnerable consumers to make a profit align with the Sherman Antitrust Act's definition of a monopoly (FTC, n.d.) and share similarities with their historical counterparts.

Nonetheless, there is a clear divergence between the early 20^{th} and 21^{st} century monopolies. Property rights are critical in addressing modern forms of monopolies, how they should be regulated and the direction they will continue to evolve in. At one point, the relationship between consumer and producer within a monopolized market was apparent; the producers created a product or service that would be bought by the consumer at the price determined by the producer. This relationship has drastically changed in modern monopolies, becoming more obscure (Fischer, 2021). Unknowingly, consumers have begun to offer their data and social media activity as a product that these firms are attaining and selling. In turn, social networking platforms are offered for free because their revenue is generated through the sale and utilization of this data for targeted advertising (Cyphers, 2020; Fischer, 2021; Pereira, 2024). The relationship is not as straightforward as before, as goods are being offered by both parties and profit can be made by both sides. To determine the direction of social media and technology companies, users' awareness of their role in data collection and targeted advertisement must improve. If users were inclined to read the terms and conditions agreements offered by social media companies before signing up for an account, understand their property rights and the value of their monitored data on the internet, and were given the option to withhold their data, the success and expansion of these firms could fluctuate (Fischer, 2021).

The comprehension and cognizance of historical forms of monopolies are significant in understanding and addressing the arising social media and technology firms that are widely regarded as monopolies. The precedents set by the Sherman Antitrust Acts, and the subsequent dismantling of the major industries of Standard Oil and American Tobacco, are useful in the litigation processes of companies such as Google and Facebook. They encourage consumers and the government to be weary of their transactional relationship with firms that make up a large market concentration, and they can help prevent the exploitation of consumers resulting from corporate profit and greed (Federal Trade, 2021). Despite this, the key differences between historical and modern monopolies, such as consumers providing their activity data as a good and internet property rights being hard to maneuver, have no precedented examples or solutions (Fischer, 2021; Salop, 2021). The technology and social networking industries are new, and the companies that have taken the opportunity to dominate the market share of these sections of the internet are even newer. The future of social networking companies' success, their acquisition of rivals, and the conglomeration of other internet services is puzzling to predict. To regulate these companies and protect the consumer, it is necessary to have concise property rights in the internet context and to educate consumers on the value of their data (Fischer, 2021). In the coming years, the outcomes of antitrust legal proceedings across technology and social media companies will only set new precedents for the future and ultramodern industries that may emerge.

4. Social Media Monopolies and Mental Health

The relationship between social media and mental health has been consistently unclear, with research showing both negative and positive associations. Multiple studies have found that social media usage is correlated with the likelihood of experiencing mental illness as well as anxiety, depression, body image issues, social isolation, bullying, and suicidal ideation (Karim et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2020; Ulvi et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Conversely, studies have also discovered that social media can positively influence mental health by giving individuals' a sense of community, providing social support, allowing a space for self-expression, and spreading information on physical and mental health and public issues (Karim et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2020; Ulvi et al., 2022). However, limited research has explored how the monopolization of the social media industry by Facebook and Google specifically contributes to this relationship.

5. Adverse Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

Studies have shown that social media companies' attempts to dominate the social media realm may contribute to and exacerbate adverse effects of social media on mental health. To increase their revenues and eliminate their competitors, Facebook and Google must capture social media users' attention and maximize engagement with their sites (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube). As a result, addictive design elements are incorporated into their business models. For instance, they surveille users' internet activity to create personalized content and targeted advertisements that appeal to users and encourages excessive use (Day, 2021). Usage of social media is positively associated with poor mental health outcomes, with studies finding that the more time an individual spends on social media, the worse their symptoms of mental illness become (Naslund et al., 2020). This can spiral into technology addiction, which is associated with anxiety, depression, and ADHD symptoms (Day, 2021). Yang et al. (2022) suggested that this correlation may stem from users becoming less connected to their real lives as they become dependent on social media, demonstrating social media's impact not only on users' mental well-being but also on their social life (Yang et al., 2022). Furthermore, this abundance of content can negatively impact users' cognition by overloading users' attention, resulting in poor decision-making and impulse control issues (Day, 2021).

Personalized content derived from user data on social media has also been associated with mental health concerns. This content can foster social comparisons and expose users to triggering or upsetting content, which can exacerbate

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anxiety and depressive symptoms (Naslund et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022). Some users may utilize social media to engage with harmful content related to their mental health struggles, such as dieting, idealized body images, or the glorification of self-harm or suicide. Social media sites, notably Instagram, remember this activity and may promote similar content and targeted advertisements, resulting in users being continuously exposed to content that encourages behaviors related to their mental illness (Ulvi et al., 2022). Clinicians, thus, should have a strong understanding about the risks associated with social media and be trained on how to navigate these issues with clients. It is also important for them to be able to identify and counsel individuals with internet addiction, which may mean assessing clients' social media use and encouraging behaviors that reduce overuse.

Despite the abundance of evidence of the negative impacts Facebook's and Google's market concentration has on mental health, there is controversy over whether the precedents established by the Sherman Antitrust Acts apply. Historically, antitrust laws responded to economic issues rather than mental health issues; however, many argue that the adverse mental health effects are so profound as to warrant penalization (Day, 2021). It is necessary for clinicians to be included in these discussions, as they can offer valuable insight into the psychological harms associated with social media and show that these impacts are as deserving of attention as economic injuries.

6. Benefits of Social Media on Mental Health

While the majority of research on social media companies has focused on social media's negative components, there is some evidence that their business models can promote mental health. Recent studies have explored if and how targeted advertisements can be harnessed to help users find support and receive mental health care. There is a significant disparity between the number of individuals who are struggling with their mental health and the number of those who have access to and receive treatment (Naslund et al., 2020). The National Institute of Mental Health reported that only 50.6% of U.S. adults with any mental illness received treatment in 2022 (National Institute of Mental, 2024). This number is slightly lower for 18-25-year-olds, the most frequent social media users, at 49.1% receiving care. Due to the prevalence of social media usage among U.S. adults, many individuals search for mental health information and/or treatment online (Birnbaum et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2020; Naslund et al., 2020). This gives social media sites and their use of targeted advertisements the potential to help bridge this gap in treatment. Birnbaum et al. (2022) conducted a study in which they implemented a digital campaign and care navigation platform through searches and targeted advertisements on Google, Facebook, and Instagram (Birnbaum et al., 2022). These sites were chosen due to their dominance in the social media realm and their use of users' internet activity in tailoring individualized advertisements. Their findings suggest that targeted advertisements can be effective in identifying struggling individuals and connecting them with mental health treatment early, discovering that many users interacted with the ads, and some were even referred to care. These users came from diverse backgrounds, which suggests that mental health promotion through social media can reach broader and more diverse populations than traditional methods (Birnbaum et al., 2022). Meta-analyses on the relationship between social media and mental health found additional evidence to support social media's effectiveness in promoting and educating users about mental health and connecting them to mental health services (Naslund et al., 2020; Ulvi et al., 2022). More research with larger and more diverse samples are necessary to explore if and how social media can be leveraged to promote mental health and refer users to treatment (Naslund et al., 2020).

Other studies have expanded upon the benefit of social media monopolies in reaching diverse users by exploring the potential of advertisements to advance mental health research of underrepresented populations. Kayrouz et al. (2016) and Teo et al. (2018) found that Facebook advertisements can be an effective tool for recruiting participants from populations that have been hard to reach and largely excluded from research, such as Arab individuals and military veterans (Kayrouz et al., 2016; Teo et al., 2018). This is a significant benefit, as it can expand clinical knowledge and may lead to greater representation of diverse populations in research.

With the increasing usage of social media and social media companies growing market concentration, clinicians should utilize social media for research recruitment and to identify and connect struggling individuals with mental health support and resources (Ulvi et al., 2022). To be successful in this, clinicians must develop social media literacy and be capable of utilizing these sites. Furthermore, clinicians should work with social media companies to incorporate comprehensive and effective mental health advertisements and treatment opportunities onto these sites (Naslund et al., 2020). Due to the challenges in applying

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antitrust legislation to social media companies, it is unclear whether they will be broken up anytime soon. Therefore, clinicians must recognize the relationship between social media and mental health and work toward leveraging these sites as a tool to promote mental well-being.

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Authors contributed equally to this article.

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