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# How Social Media Connects and Divides Us: Psychological Insights and Paths Forward

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## ABSTRACT

Social media was once celebrated as a revolutionary space for constructive connection. While it can foster community, amplify marginalised voices and expose users to diverse perspectives, these platforms are also implicated in the rise of polarisation, intergroup conflict and extremist movements. This review examines how social media use can be both beneficial and detrimental, with a focus on the key underlying psychological mechanisms that explain, in part, the effect of social media on inter- and intra-group relations. Drawing on theories of social identity, confirmation bias and moral psychology, we argue that social media platform design interacts with core psychological tendencies in ways that are both constructive and destructive for social groups and society. We conclude by offering actionable insights for platforms, practitioners and users, showing how psychological knowledge can inform interventions aimed at reducing the destructive outcomes of social media—promoting more positive social change in the digital age.

## 1 | Introduction

Social media was once envisioned as a revolutionary tool for connection (Ellison et al. 2007; Wellman et al. 2001). Understood as digital spaces where users can create and share content, major social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube and Reddit. Since their inception, platforms promised to bridge geographic divides (Hansen et al. 2010), foster community (Lucero 2017) and promote equity by elevating marginalised voices (Ortiz et al. 2019). Social media connects people globally (Hansen et al. 2010) and has amplified movements such as the Arab Spring (Smidi and Shahin 2017) and #MeToo (Quan-Haase et al. 2021)—increasing democratic participation.

However, social media has also helped extremists and terrorists build online networks (Lavie-Driver and van der Linden 2025), and social media has been blamed for promoting growing polarisation in many societies (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021; Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2022). Sites like Facebook and X were spaces where January 6th rioters organised and planned (Klein 2025). Similarly, incel communities—active on forums like Discord—use social media to cultivate a shared misogynistic identity, circulate violent rhetoric and reinforce grievances that contribute to real-world acts of violence (Aiolfi et al. 2024).

Social media has also come under scrutiny for its role in fostering political divisions through spreading misinformation (e.g., during the 2020 US presidential election; Benaissa Pedriza 2021). It has also been implicated in amplifying ethnic prejudice and violence. For instance, Facebook played a critical role in fuelling anti-Rohingya sentiment in Myanmar, contributing to hostility culminating in a military crackdown that killed thousands (Nourooz Pour 2023).

Here, we examine how social media interacts with core psychological processes to generate both constructive and destructive outcomes.[1] While we distinguish between constructive and

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destructive outcomes, this distinction refers to differences in social and psychological dynamics—such as whether interactions foster cooperation or polarisation—rather than normative judgements regarding which political or moral ends are objectively preferable. In many cases, different groups may see the same outcomes as constructive or destructive, depending on their values and goals.

Scholars have developed frameworks for understanding the relationship between social media and societal outcomes. Some have highlighted how social media drives affective polarisation via its influence on social identity (Törnberg et al. 2021), while others have examined broader mechanisms (e.g., information processing, political engagement and content framing; Arora et al. 2022). Here, we extend this work by focusing on several key socio-psychological processes that are central for understanding the effects of social media, providing a novel framework for assessing some of the reasons why social media can lead to both constructive and destructive outcomes.

We argue platforms are not inherently harmful; rather, their design features interact with basic psychological tendencies in ways that magnify both harmful and beneficial outcomes. We focus on three processes: (1) social and politicised identity (shaping how people categorise themselves and others), (2) confirmation bias (shaping what information people attend to, believe and share), and (3) moral judgements (shaping how people interpret events and respond to perceived wrongdoing). These processes are central to how people make sense of the world (Dickinson 2025; Gray and Kubin 2024; Mason 2018)—though we do not claim they are the only forces relevant for understanding the effect of social media. We outline the relationship between social media and these psychological processes and then discuss how these insights can be leveraged to foster further constructive outcomes on social media.

## 1.1 | Social Identity, Politicised Identity and Social Media

Social identities are aspects of the self that are derived from group memberships (Tajfel and Turner 1979)—like our nationality or race. These identities inform our understandings of ourselves and the world and influence what we believe and how we treat others (Van Bavel and Packer 2021). A related concept is politicised identity, which is a social identity that is connected to collective political struggles, in response to perceived injustice in society (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Research shows that when identities become politicised, people engage in political (e.g., protests; van Zomeren et al. 2008) and solidarity-based (Becker and Tausch 2017) actions. Importantly, social (and political) identities both shape and are shaped by social media usage (Avci et al. 2025; Pan et al. 2017) and are critical for understanding when social media leads to constructive or destructive outcomes.

### 1.1.1 | Destructive Outcomes

Social media connects users with similar interests, beliefs and values (e.g., Lucero 2017). These connections reaffirm users' beliefs about groups and can heighten ingroup liking and outgroup disliking (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021). While in some cases, this may be harmless (e.g., fans of dogs vs. cats), in other situations, it exacerbates conflict by reaffirming identities (e.g., Brexit Leavers vs. Remainers), which can exacerbate intergroup conflict (Mason 2018) and mobilise extremist movements. Social media connects people with extreme ideologies (e.g., White supremacists)—helping them organise (Lavie-Driver and van der Linden 2025) and form a shared identity. Platforms like 4chan are known for connecting individuals with extremist beliefs, strengthening ingroup belonging and identity through shared memes, language and grievances (Klein and Golbeck 2024; Kristinsdottir et al. 2025), enabling users to radicalise.

### 1.1.2 | Constructive Outcomes

Social media can also provide opportunities to connect with people from ones' social group (Carr 2017) and explore hybrid identities (Boudreau 2013) in ways that are arguably beneficial. Social media helps people find communities they would not find in their daily lives (e.g., a lesbian from a small town connecting with a queer community on Facebook), positively fostering social identities and belonging (Eickers 2024). In this way, social media is beneficial for building social ties (Tiwari et al. 2019)—especially for those who are unable to do so offline.

Such connections can also transform online interactions into shared identities that motivate real-world engagement (Althoff et al. 2017). For example, by enhancing ingroup identification and validating lived experiences of discrimination, social media has played a central role in mobilizing social movements like #BlackLivesMatter (De Choudhury et al. 2016) to challenge injustice.

## 1.2 | Confirmation Bias and Social Media

Confirmation bias is our tendency to seek information in line with prior beliefs (Nickerson 1998) and influences how we understand the world (Dickinson 2025). Social media exacerbates this bias by exposing people to information in line with their views, creating 'echo-chambers' (Duskin et al. 2024).[2] But how can social media's amplification of confirmation bias be both beneficial and harmful to groups and society at large?

### 1.2.1 | Destructive Outcomes

Social media exposes users to content in line with their views because its algorithms are designed to maximise user engagement (Milli et al. 2025), and users stay engaged when content is in line with their beliefs (Mosleh et al. 2025). This means users are often exposed to misinformation or political arguments they agree with (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2015). This selective exposure keeps people in social media 'bubbles'—fuelling polarisation, reinforcing stereotypes and increasing conflict (Benson 2024).

The role of confirmation bias on social media can be especially troubling when considering extremism. Social media exposes extremists (and those inclined to these beliefs) content consistently reaffirming their beliefs (see discussions of 'rabbit holes'

to radicalisation via YouTube videos; Ledwich and Zaitsev 2019). Social media algorithms amplify emotive content that can make extremist messages particularly influential (Brady et al. 2021) and reaffirming. This can normalise extreme content and ideology over time, increasing the risk of extremism and offline violence (Baele et al. 2021).

#### 1.2.2 | Constructive Outcomes

Confirmation bias can also be constructive. When pro-social beliefs—such as supporting climate action[3]—are shared and reinforced within groups, confirmation bias can deepen these commitments (Mercier and Sperber 2017). Social media amplifies these effects by allowing individuals to engage with communities that affirm positive social norms. This has fostered collective engagement in movements like Fridays for Future (Sainz and Hanna 2023). In these communities, repeated exposure to belief-consistent information via social media (Johann et al. 2023) fuels collective engagement and empowers activists to challenge political inaction and misinformation.

### 1.3 | Intersections Between Morality and Social Media

Emerging moral psychology research suggests moral judgements are based on perceptions of victimisation (Gray and Kubin 2024). The more victimhood we see, the more immoral it seems (Schein and Gray 2018). These moral judgements shape how people understand politics, conflict and allies versus opponents (Gray and Kubin 2024). Social media platforms amplify such judgements by exposing people to morally outraging content (Carpenter et al. 2020)—content especially likely to increase user engagement (Brady et al. 2017; Milli et al. 2025). But how can this drive both constructive and destructive outcomes in society?

#### 1.3.1 | Destructive Outcomes

Because understandings of victimhood are a matter of perception (Gray et al. 2022), individuals tend to empathise with victims aligned with their moral and political values (Womick et al. 2024). On social media, users are disproportionately exposed to morally outraging content highlighting the suffering of groups they already care about (Carpenter et al. 2020). For example, in the United States, liberals are more focused on the victimhood of immigrants and pregnant women, while conservatives are more focused on the victimhood of citizens and foetuses (Schein and Gray 2015). This exposure to morally salient victimhood reinforces partisan narratives and obscures competing perspectives, making it harder to understand or empathise with political outgroup concerns (Womick et al. 2024)—driving animosity (Milli et al. 2025). Over time, this fragmented moral landscape, reinforced by social media, can fuel polarisation.

#### 1.3.2 | Constructive Outcomes

Morally outraging social media content can also build connection, fostering compassion and solidarity across groups. When people recognise an act as similarly immoral (e.g., terrorist attacks or natural disasters), outrage can unite rather than divide (Gray and Kubin 2024). Images and stories of such victims spread rapidly online, prompting widespread empathy. For example, the #PrayForParis response to the 2015 terrorist attack led millions around the world to express support for the victims (O'Loughlin et al. 2017).

Morality and social media can also promote collective action. Exposure to morally outraging content on social media motivates individuals to challenge injustices. For example, widely circulated images and videos on social media documenting the Syrian government's chemical attacks on civilians generated global outrage and sparked international calls for accountability (Seo and Ebrahim 2016). In such cases, social media amplifies morally shocking content in ways that mobilise users to oppose violence, injustice and human rights violations.

### 1.4 | Interactions Between These Processes

While we present each of these psychological processes as distinct, they often interact in practice. For example, confirmation biases are tied to the tendency to seek validation from others with shared social identities (see *shared reality theory*, Echterhoff and Higgins 2021). Similarly, identities can become moralised and fuel polarisation (e.g., D'Amore et al. 2024; Turner-Zwinkels et al. 2017), and moral beliefs can strengthen confirmation biases (Cusimano and Lombrozo 2023). Although we do not attempt to model these interactions in detail, recognising their interdependence is crucial: On social media platforms, where identity cues, moral framing and selective exposure are ubiquitous, these processes are likely to operate synergistically.

### 1.5 | Paths Forward

Social media functions not only as a networking platform but also reflects and amplifies human psychology. Understanding how psychological forces shape social media outcomes is relevant to academics, platform designers, policy makers, educators and activists. Without a grounding in psychology, well-intentioned efforts to reform or leverage social media can backfire—fuelling division rather than alleviating it. By integrating psychological insights into the design and regulation of platforms, we can build environments that encourage empathy and constructive connection both between and within groups.

#### 1.5.1 | Recommendations Based on Psychological Insights

Understanding how human psychology and social media interact to drive constructive and destructive outcomes is essential for those interested in developing less divisive and harm-inducing social media platforms. Below, we provide recommendations for social media platforms, practitioners and users interested in fostering constructive outcomes.

**1.5.1.1 | Social Media Platforms.** Platforms should promote content highlighting shared identities between groups. For

example, through emphasising common humanity or the shared goals of competing groups (e.g., Democrats and Republicans shared goals of a safer and healthier society)—a strategy research has shown to be effective for bridging divides (Levendusky 2018). Such collective goals can lead to joint efforts towards positive social change.

Platforms should build algorithms that expose users to counter-attitudinal perspectives to combat the re-enforcement of pre-existing beliefs. Evidence suggests exposure to counter-attitudinal information reduces polarisation between politically divided groups (Levy 2021) and can moderate extremist ideologies (Kim 2015). However, caution is needed, as exposure to opposing views can also exacerbate conflict (Bail et al. 2018), particularly when people are exposed to the most extreme and polarising content from outgroup members (Carpenter et al. 2020). We therefore suggest that exposure to more moderate perspectives (which tend to be held by a majority of outgroup members) is the view that will be especially likely to be beneficial (Betts et al. 2026). Exposure to moderate outgroup perspectives may also lead to shifts in beliefs and actions that support broader social and political causes, including those that benefit other groups.

Platforms should also deprioritise morally outrageous content that highlights partisan-aligned victims and instead elevate stories of moral victims that resonate across group lines (Gray and Kubin 2024). This notion is supported by research suggesting social media content about opponents who express their moral victimhood can reduce animosity (Kubin et al. 2023). Shifting the moral content social media users are exposed to can foster shared values that promote cooperation towards common goals.

**1.5.1.2 | Practitioners.** Practitioners should consider storytelling social media interventions that help groups learn about one another and recognise the complexity of social identity (Li et al. 2023). Such interventions foster moral understanding, particularly when stories highlight how personal experiences of suffering shape outgroup members' worldviews (Beckerman et al. 2025; Kubin et al. 2021). Additionally, digital literacy training (e.g., Bawden and Robinson 2002) that helps individuals recognise their own cognitive biases, identity-driven reasoning and the amplifying effects of social media algorithms is likely to be a valuable complementary approach—helping users better navigate online environments.

**1.5.1.3 | Social Media Users.** Users should recognise how psychological tendencies—like social identity, confirmation bias and moral judgements—interact with social media to shape how we see the world. These forces often lead us to engage with like-minded content and respond emotionally to opposing views, reinforcing division. Intentionally seeking out counter-attitudinal perspectives can, in some cases, reduce animosity (e.g., Levy 2021). Further, emotionally and morally provocative contents are amplified by algorithms because they drive engagement (Brady et al. 2017). Understanding these realities may help create psychological distance to the content and reduce one's emotional response (Kross and Ayduk 2011). When media users engage with outgroup members online, they should focus on shared identities (Levendusky 2018) or a common understanding of victimhood (Gray and Kubin 2024), to foster constructive connection.

### 1.6 | A Note of Caution

There are many factors that can make it exceptionally challenging to enhance constructive (and minimise destructive) outcomes of social media. Platforms can be strategically manipulated by bad-faith actors (e.g., propaganda campaigns and authoritarian governments) in ways that substantially shape intra- and inter-group relations (also see Kubin and Parker 2026). For instance, Russian state-linked operatives have conducted large-scale social media bot campaigns designed to exacerbate political polarisation in the United States (Panditharatne and Hasan 2024), leading to offline protests (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2020). As emerging technologies further lower the cost and increase the scale of such influence operations, these risks are likely to intensify. In particular, the rise of coordinated 'AI swarms' (Schroeder et al. 2026) and increasingly realistic AI-generated deepfakes (Islam et al. 2024) has expanded the toolkit available to malicious actors, enabling more targeted, persuasive and difficult-to-detect campaigns that spread misinformation, inflame conflict and undermine democratic institutions (e.g., Dek et al. 2025; Hartzog and Silbey 2025; Kreps and Kriner 2023).

Further, social media companies may be financially motivated to maintain the status quo. Companies are incentivised by ad revenue to keep users on their platforms for as long as possible. One of the most effective ways to maintain engagement is through showing users morally outraging and polarising content (Carpenter et al. 2020)—making effective social media interventions challenging (Kubin and von Sikorski 2023). Reducing the destructive outcomes of social media may directly conflict with social media platforms' incentives—making it unlikely that they will implement such changes. However, some recent technological developments may bypass the need for social media buy-in (e.g., via browser extension interventions; Piccardi et al. 2025)—a major step forward for intervention development.

If social media companies are unwilling to design their platforms in ways that mitigate the destructive societal outcomes, then others must also consider what actions they can take to mitigate these deleterious effects. Users, for example, can exert pressure on social media companies by migrating away from platforms that exacerbate division and polarisation and towards those that minimise these harms (e.g., the exodus from X after it was acquired by Elon Musk; Tenbarge and Collier 2024). Additionally, policy makers can regulate social media platforms in ways that force these companies to reduce the destructive outcomes of their platforms. Such regulatory efforts can be highly effective (e.g., the European Union's Digital Services Act; Ask EP 2024; Haugen 2022) and may be especially promising for addressing many destructive outcomes of social media.

## 2 | Conclusion

The relationship between human psychology and social media is complex; it can reinforce conflict and extremism but also build connection across shared identities and goals. With rising social media use and the potential for malicious actions, now, more than ever, collaboration between psychologists, platform designers, policy makers and users is needed to reduce the potential harmful effects of social media consumption. By embedding psychological

knowledge into the design and use of social media, we can move from a system that amplifies psychological tendencies towards destructive outcomes to one that actively supports constructive processes for the greater good.

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**Emily Kubin**: conceptualisation, writing – original draft, writing – reviewing and editing. **Shelley McKeown**: conceptualisation, writing – reviewing and editing.


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### Ethics Statement

No ethical review was conducted for this work as no data from participants were collected.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report

### Endnotes

[1] While social media influences people at the individual level (e.g., mental health and well-being; Beyens et al. 2020; O'Reilly et al. 2018), this article focuses on group-level forces (e.g., mobilisation, polarisation and group formation).

[2] Some question whether echo chambers are pertinent (Bright et al. 2020) or exist at all (Bruns 2019).

[3] Here, we are not attempting to make a normative argument that climate action will be seen by all groups as a constructive outcome but rather point to the constructive effects of social media on collective action.

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