# "Fridays Are Racist":
## Evaluating Social Media Engagement From a Virtue Ethics Framework

Lana Medina, Penn State University, USA*

https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8482-8679

## ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have become a threat to democracy and human flourishing. Critics have previously expressed alarm that our ever-increasing technological habits are negatively influencing human values and virtues. This research explores how the engagement design of social media sites is a morally questionable metric for social media 'success'. Using a virtue ethics framework in relation to technology ethics research, as well as drawing from the work of Ellul (1962) and technology philosophers, this paper emphasizes the need for perspective and civility in engagement and argues for solutions that withdraw from an engagement design built on efficiency and financial gain. Proposed solutions include global change in the form of 1) altered weights for algorithmic prioritization (e.g., promoting diverse topics and reducing tribalist engagement), 2) returning autonomy to users (compared to corporate control), and 3) global legislation (i.e., the European Union's DSA).

## KEYWORDS

Algorithms, Autonomy, Civic Virtue, Ellul, Engagement, Global Regulation, Media Ethics, Platforms, Social Media, Virtue Ethics

## INTRODUCTION

In a social media "roast," comedian Ronny Chieng mocked Daily Show host Trevor Noah for his positive Tweet: "Happy Friday to all of my followers!" Chieng argued in false outrage that Twitter is not intended for kindness and friendly messages, but for hate (Noah, 2022). As Chieng went on to explain, "You've gotta be controversial…you should say something like, 'Fridays are racist!'". By the culmination of the banter, Chieng concluded their argument was engagement. Although intended humorously, Chieng's poignant observation about Twitter (and other social media platforms) strikes to the core of the controversy behind engagement.

Critics have previously expressed alarm that ever-increasing technological habits are negatively influencing human values and virtues (Vallor, 2016). Several scholars have pointed to the negative effects of social networking sites, including aspects of depression and low self-esteem (Pantic, 2014), decreased exposure to counter-attitudinal viewpoint and increased polarizing beliefs (Levy, 2021), and

*Corresponding Author

lack of moral autonomy through manipulated engagement design (Bowen, 2013). Saura et al. (2021) analyzed how the engagement design of social media sites "can generate addiction and modification of user behavior and feelings" (p. 271). However, past research stopped short of critiquing engagement as a morally questionable metric for social media "success." In this study, the author sought to explore the problems associated with engagement and suggest potential solutions.

## Benefits vs. Concerns

Scholars have identified positive aspects of social media use. In a meta-analytic review of research involving social media use and civic engagement, Skoric et al. (2016) identified positive relationships of social media use, including expressive (i.e., expressing oneself and articulating ideas, opinions, and thoughts), informational (i.e., seeking, gathering, and sharing news and community/political information), and relational (i.e., using social media to strengthen relationships with others) forms. Conversely, Skoric et al. found negative relationships between civic engagement and social media use that focused on identity (i.e., using social media to create one's identity, gain recognition, and increase status) and entertainment purposes. Early research indicated how social media platforms were providing opportunities for both intensifying relationships and expanding social connections, as well as increased civic engagement and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Furthermore, not all engagement relies on negative emotional reactions, such as outrage and disgust. In an online experiment regarding emotions in relation to viral video advertisements, the authors explained how feelings of awe and affective emotions prompted viral sharing, leading to expressions of emotional connection and generosity (Nikolinakou & King, 2018). Spring et al. (2018) emphasized the benefits of moral outrage as a community motivator on social media.

However, none of these benefits offset the *incivility*, perpetuated through a language of outrage, polarizing viewpoints, confrontational, and negative emotional rhetoric, that the nature of social media engagement augments to greater visibility. Political mudslinging and sensational rhetoric have been favored of cable news and talk radio shows; however, these shows primarily relied on word-of-mouth, repeat followers, and advertisements to gain traction. The motivation behind engagement is the same: Sensational comments and headlines, personality-centered mode of "talking at" someone, rather than "talking to," and one-sided ideological viewpoints (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014).

Due to this algorithmic design, users may be locked into bubbles based on the actions of one's social network. If a user's social network includes people who engage and share news, they are more likely to view this information (i.e., incidental news exposure); if a user's social network includes people who disseminate one-sided information and that user engages, their feed is more likely to be flooded with similar post types.

## What Counts as "Engagement?"

Scholars have identified three dimensions of consumer engagement: Cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Cao et al., 2021). Cognitive engagement refers to concentrated attention and absorption, affective engagement involves emotional response, and behavioral engagement connotes behavioral actions, such as sharing and learning (similar to the social media analytics data used to measure success in social media engagement) (Pentina et al., 2018).

In a review of social media scholarship, Saura et al. (2021) developed a taxonomy of performance and design metrics. For user engagement, the list included:

1. How long social media users look at a picture or video.
2. The average time users are connected to a social media site per visit.
3. The number of pages that users see in one visit to social media platforms.
4. The number of interactions (e.g., likes, reactions, shares, and comments).
5. User sentiments through sentiment analysis algorithms.
6. Recent searches (i.e., what users want to see in their feed).

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