Psychology of Popular Media

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Which Platforms Count? The Diverse Meanings of "Social Media" in the United States

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The effects of using social media platforms remain hotly debated, but insufficient research has focused on how individuals define what social media is. Here, we consider how different understandings of the term "social media" may influence how people think and talk about social media experiences and effects. To test this, we asked a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States (N = 1,904) to indicate whether 12 popular platforms are "social media." Our results revealed significant variation in the identification of "social media", with general agreement that six platforms are social media (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok) and a lack of consensus about the other six (Telegram, Signal, Discord, WhatsApp, Messenger, and YouTube). Younger participants were more likely to view four platforms as social media (Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok), whereas older participants were more likely to view six platforms as social media (Reddit, YouTube, Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp, and Messenger). In addition, we examined the correlates of holding broad versus narrow social media schemas, finding that individuals with broader schemas perceived hate speech to be more prevalent on social media. Looking forward, we discuss how the lack of consensus around the term "social media" may affect how people respond to survey questions about social media, as well as perceive and converse about their effects and policy implications in society.

Public Policy Relevance Statement

This study examined how people understand the term "social media." Our findings highlight highly diverse views of social media and suggest that divergent perceptions may influence how people think and talk about communication technologies.

Keywords: lay definitions, platforms, schemas, breadth, measurement

Supplemental materials: https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000656.supp

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The term "social media" is said to have been first used in the 1990s (Bercovici, 2010). At the time, the term was applied to internet platforms that were evolving toward the goal of social connection, rather than being a tool for sharing information (e.g., documents). Since then, the number of social connection platforms has grown exponentially, with each offering users a new way—or at least a newly branded way—to engage with others online (Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). Yet, even in recent debates around the

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All data analyzed in the current study and its accompanying code are available in a public repository: https://osf.io/e75wb/.

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potential regulation of these platforms (Murthy, 2024), our understanding of what the term "social media" means—and how its meaning varies across people—remains shrouded in assumptions. Different uses of this term may cause miscommunications in everyday life, as well as miscalculations in research (e.g., biased responses to survey items). If one person thinks that YouTube is "social media" and another does not, the two people may respond to questions about social platforms with different assumptions and ideas in mind—potentially muddying scientific findings. Furthermore, these different understandings of what counts as "social media" can influence how users are perceiving and discussing the implications of communication technologies (e.g., how to address online hate speech). In other words, we suggest that varying classifications of social media may be shaping perceptions of what occurs on social media—for example, behaviors, norms, and regulations—and thus how users understand and discuss social platforms. To explain the implications of social media, therefore, we must first unravel the varying classifications of social media.

From Social Media Definitions to Identification

"Social media" platforms have been studied across many disciplines given their widespread usage and presumed influence on daily life (Bengtsson & Johansson, 2022; Fox & McEwan, 2020; Schemer et al., 2021; Valkenburg, 2022). However, even as these platforms have cemented their place in everyday life for many people, there has been a lack of consensus—among both scholars and the general public—regarding what social media is. The struggle to clearly define social media is likely due to the array of challenges that emerge when trying to apply hard rules for classifying platforms as social media or not. First, there are many platforms that are feasibly (or at least colloquially) considered "social" (e.g., Is Spotify a social media platform if it is has a friends list?; Baym, 2015; Bruns, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). Second, platforms differ in their design, each prioritizing different elements (Bayer et al., 2020) and online spaces (Madianou, 2015)—making it challenging to come up with a comprehensive, future-proof set of features that count as social media. Third, platforms each differ in their norms and userbases (Angelini et al., 2024), which leads to qualitatively different social environments even beyond whether the technical features are different (e.g., Does a social feed on a work Slack count as social media?). Fourth, social platforms are fast-changing and have gone through many iterations (Aichner et al., 2021), making it difficult to narrow down what features (new or old) should comprise a formal definition of social media. Altogether, it is surprisingly difficult to account for all possible dimensions within one definition.

Despite these challenges, some work has attempted to conceptualize the key or defining components of social media, as well as provide guiding criteria for what qualifies as social media (Bayer et al., 2020; Carr & Hayes, 2015; Wolfers et al., 2025). For instance, some research has defined social media based on its dependency on user-generated content (Aichner et al., 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Obar & Wildman, 2015). Other work stresses how social media incorporates characteristics of both mass media and interpersonal communication, or so-called masspersonal communication (Vorderer et al., 2017). For instance, one widely used scholarly definition specifies social media as "internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 50). Nonetheless, defining the technical boundaries for what constitutes "social media" remains difficult due to the dynamic nature of online social environments. In practice, however, researchers have often gravitated to the most popular platforms that are commonly, colloquially seen as social media in (Western) society (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) without clearly defending the latent assumptions (Pew Research Center, 2024; Rains & Brunner, 2015). Alternatively, some researchers have called for a wider scope on "social media" to account for the relevance and influence of social gaming platforms (Maheux et al., 2025a). For these reasons, the definition of social media, even for researchers, is more of a social construct than an agreed-upon type of technology.

Beyond scholarly definitions, defining social media can be complex for users themselves. The social media ecosystem is increasingly diverse and highly fragmented, leading to personalized sets of experiences in multifaceted online environments (Bayer et al., 2020; Maheux et al., 2025b). The diversity of experiences is visible in work on users' tendencies to quickly switch between a wide variety of platforms in daily life (Frey & Friemel, 2023; Gottfried, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). As users jump between different platforms, they may come to attribute different norms and goals to each platform (Boczkowski et al., 2018)—and may even compare and contrast platforms directly. Research affirms that how everyday users define and categorize platforms is confounding, with users expressing highly varied understandings of so-called "social media" platforms (Rhee et al., 2021; Wolfers et al., 2025). However, although some work has explored differences in how users define specific platforms that are commonly assumed to be social media, it is less clear how people identify which platforms qualify as "social media." The identification of social media platforms requires that people match their individual understandings of a given platform to the broader cognitive category of "social media" (and all that it entails). Hence, here we lean into a "general user-centered perspective" of social media (Wolfers et al., 2025) to consider how people understand the category or label of "social media," leading to the research question:

> *Research Question 1 (RQ1):* What Platforms Do People Identify as "Social Media"?

Individual Differences in Social Media Identification

A wide variety of research studies and consumer reports have shown that users' demographic characteristics—such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnic identity—are related to platform usage (Correa, 2010; Feng et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2024; Matassi et al., 2022). Although the way different groups use social media has been studied extensively, little is known about how these differences relate to how users identify what social media *is*. Perhaps most notably, past research has established that age is one of the most central predictors of social media usage, with major differences found between young adults and their older adult counterparts in terms of social media frequency (Duggan, 2015; Gottfried, 2024), privacy literacy and attitudes (Kezer et al., 2016), media literacy (Vaterlaus et al., 2015), mental health (Valkenburg, 2022), among other differences. However, asking participants survey questions about individual platforms or "social media" in general does not clarify what they are personally seeing as social

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media. Indeed, asking a 14-year-old versus a 74-year-old about "social media" is likely to produce conversations with very different platforms in mind. Considering the large gap of Instagram usage between younger and older individuals (78% vs. 15%, respectively; Gottfried, 2024), one might predict the 14-year-old is thinking of Instagram and the 74-year-old might not be. In sum, age differences, and the different experiences that come with different generations, may affect how people are perceiving and grouping platforms to form their understanding of the term "social media."

In addition to age, we also consider whether other established demographic and identity categories are related to how people define social platforms. A variety of descriptive research has demonstrated that different demographic groups use different social media platforms (Gottfried, 2024; Motyl, 2024). This work has revealed a variety of divides in platform usage. For instance, women are more likely to use platforms such as Instagram and TikTok as compared with men. People with higher levels of income are more likely to use LinkedIn and Pinterest than those with lower levels of income. Those with higher levels of education use YouTube more than those with lower levels of education. Even political party identification can polarize perceptions of social media. For instance, there has been a shift in approval ratings of platforms such as Twitter/X among various political memberships—with Republicans' approval of Twitter/X tripling since 2021 and Democrats' approval declining (McClain et al., 2024). Given the vast divides in social media behavior across demographic categories, we also consider whether these differences are associated with perceptions of what social media is.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Are There Demographic Differences in Social Media Identification?

Social Media Schemas and Breadth

What makes people classify digital platforms as "social media" or not? The term "social media" itself may evoke various associations (e.g., connection, entertainment, misinformation) based on one's understanding of the concept through personal experience or social information. Accordingly, schemas—that is, cognitive frameworks that help guide perceptions and make sense of the world—have been widely studied to examine how complex concepts are understood and internalized (Bartlett, 1932; Fiske & Linville, 1980; Neisser, 1967). In the process of perception formation, one must engage in the process of categorization by organizing concepts to simplify and assign meaning to them (Bruner, 1957). Individuals categorize objects by making comparisons to related *exemplars*—examples stored in memory—that they have encountered in the past (Medin & Schaffer, 1978). As such, individuals may have broader (vs. narrower) exemplars to draw upon when organizing various platforms into their schema of "social media"—leading to a disconnect in what the term means to different people. As a result, here we define *social media breadth* as the range of platforms that an individual considers to be "social media." Paralleling the rationale of RQ2, we thus asked whether demographic differences were also related to exhibiting a broad (vs. narrow) schema of social media overall.

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Are There Demographic Differences in Social Media Breadth?

Implications of "Social Media" Breadth

Beyond generating confusion, different understandings of the term "social media" may also anchor how people think about the implications of social media. A wide variety of studies have now demonstrated that the way in which terminology is used and framed can have an impact on people's perceptions of a given topic. For instance, the specific terminology used to describe climate change has been found to alter beliefs about climate change (Commerçon et al., 2023; Grolleau et al., 2022; Schuldt et al., 2011). Other studies have found impacts of language on perceptions and attitudes when discussing racial labels (e.g., "Black" vs. "African American"; Hall et al., 2021), White privilege (Quarles & Bozarth, 2022), and religious labels (Al-Kire et al., 2024). The term "social media"—with its dynamic and amorphous characteristics—may be similarly vulnerable to such language effects.

Here, we propose that drawing on a wider schema of social media may influence how users perceive and converse about social media at large. The wider the net that individuals cast in forming their understanding of social media, the more their perceptions of what is happening on social media (and its effects) may be inflated or diversified. In particular, we suggest that having a broader schema has the potential to shift how people respond to survey questions about "social media." Thus, how people interpret the term "social media" may shape how they answer questions about social media more generally. A long history of research has demonstrated the ways that specific terms can subtly shape responses to survey questions (Schwarz, 1999). In social media research, participants are commonly asked to estimate their perceptions of the prevalence of various behavior and content on "social media" (e.g., political news, misinformation, hate speech; Petropoulos Petalas et al., 2021). Hence, we explore whether the breadth of platforms assigned to the "social media" category has the potential to increase how much certain types of behavior or content are perceived to occur on social media.

To do so, we focus on the role of hate speech prevalence on social media, which has become a pivotal topic within the social media literature (Schmid et al., 2024; Walther, 2022). Leveraging survey data that were collected as part of a broader project on hate speech, we consider whether social media schemas are associated with the perceived prevalence of hate speech on "social media." Notably, recent work has found that people overestimate the amount of harmful content that is being posted on social media (Lee et al., 2024) and encountered on in daily life (Wirz & Blassnig, 2025), suggesting that hate speech prevalence is subject to cognitive distortion. If people interpret the term "social media" in different ways, they may answer questions about social media (e.g., prevalence of hate speech) with different experiences in mind. In this way, we focus on perceived hate speech as one important context to test the implications of "social media" schemas. In sum, we consider how different understandings of the term "social media" may result in different perceptions of hate speech on social media, above and beyond differences in social media usage.

Research Question 4 (RQ4): Does Having a Broad (vs. Narrow) Schema of "Social Media" Relate to Perceptions of Hate Speech Prevalence on Social Media?

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Method

Participants

Our sample was collected in August and September 2022 through a probability-based household panel (NORC AmeriSpeak), which leverages random sampling of address-based sample frames to recruit participants by mail, telephone, and in-person field interviews. Accordingly, our sample was designed to be highly representative of American adults. The final sample (N = 1,904) excluded 108 participants who failed an attention check; specifically, participants were excluded for indicating they had never heard of a given platform while simultaneously indicating they had used that platform). Participants were 46.53 years old on average (SD = 17.02) with 51.1% identifying as women and 48.9% identifying as men. Regarding political ideology, 35.8% identified as moderate, 32.4% identified as liberal, and 31.3% identified as conservative. Within our sample, 64.8% identified as White/Caucasian, 12.7% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 11.9% identified as Black/African American, 3.5% identified as biracial/multiracial, 1.8% identified as East Asian, 1.7% identified as South Asian, 1.1% identified as American Indian/Native American, 0.8% identified as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 0.4% identified as Arab/Middle Eastern/North African, and 1.1% identified as "other." Regarding educational background, 5.9% reported an education lower than high school, 17.1% reported finishing high school, 42.5% reported some college experience, 18.9% reported a bachelor's degree, and 15.5% reported a postgraduate or professional degree. Regarding income, 20.8% of our sample earned less than $30,000 a year, 51.5% earned between $30,000 and $100,000 a year, and 27.7% earned more than $100,000 a year.

Procedure

This study was part of a larger project examining the psychological processes underlying naturalistic social media feed engagement, with a special focus on the role of offensive content on social media. After obtaining consent, participants were directed to a series of questions pertaining to their usage and perceptions of social media platforms, familiarity, and social norms regarding hate speech, along with their sentiment toward different racial groups. Following this, they were presented with a brief instructional video that acquainted them with a novel social media feed designed for the project, and prompted to engage with the feed for 3 min. After completing the experimental social media browsing task, participants were asked questions about certain posts they engaged with in the feed. Finally, participants answered questions assessing their demographic information, social platform frequency, and social media identification. The current study focused on questions pertaining to social media and hate speech perceptions. For more information about the broader project, see the Supplemental Materials. Data and code are available at https://osf.io/e75wb/ (Torres-Pantoja et al., 2026).

Measures

Social Media Identification

To assess which platforms participants identified as social media, they were asked: "Which of the following social media platforms do you view as 'social media'?" Platforms were chosen based upon popularity and their ranking in app stores at the time the data were collected (August and September 2022): Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Messenger, Discord, Telegram, and Signal. For each of the 12 platforms, participants were instructed to select one of three response options: "social media," "not social media," or "never heard of." A composite variable, *platform awareness* (M = 9.54, SD = 1.73), was created to assess the number of platforms that participants were aware of. Two composite variables were computed to assess *social media breadth*: (a) the *count* of platforms identified as "social media" (M = 7.07, SD = 2.35) and (b) the *proportion* of platforms identified as "social media" among those that participants were aware of (M = 0.75, SD = 0.21). *Social media breadth* (count) and *platform awareness* were moderately correlated, $r(1,902) = .42$, $p < .001$, whereas *social media breadth* (proportion) and *platform awareness* were negatively correlated, $r(1,902) = -.15$, $p < .001$ (see Table S5).

Frequency

Participants were asked to indicate how often they use the 12 platforms: Facebook (M = 5.07, SD = 2.21), Twitter (M = 2.51, SD = 2.09), Reddit (M = 2.23, SD = 1.87), Instagram (M = 3.53, SD = 2.41), Snapchat (M = 2.33, SD = 2.11), YouTube (M = 4.86, SD = 1.77), TikTok (M = 2.70, SD = 2.28), WhatsApp (M = 1.88, SD = 1.76), Messenger (M = 3.98, SD = 2.24), Discord (M = 1.61, SD = 1.55), Telegram (M = 1.28, SD = 1.06), and Signal (M = 1.18, SD = 0.87). Participants responded by choosing an option from an 8-point ordinal scale with endpoints ranging from 1 (*never*) to 8 (*hourly*). We computed an *overall platform frequency* score by averaging the 12 items (M = 2.76, SD = 0.93).

Demographic Characteristics

Participants were asked to self-report their age and gender (female vs. male) as part of the standard panel survey separately conducted by NORC AmeriSpeak. Race/ethnicity, education, income, and political identification were assessed at the end of the online survey. More details of how these variables were assessed are available in the Supplemental Materials.

Hate Speech Perceptions

Participants were asked about their perceptions of hate speech norms and prevalence on social media. *Hate speech norms* (M = 1.66, SD = 1.30) were assessed by asking participants, "To what extent is it appropriate or inappropriate to write hateful and offensive posts against racial, ethnic, or religious social groups on social media platforms?" using a 7-point Likert-type scale with endpoints from 1 (*very inappropriate*) to 7 (*very appropriate*). *Hate speech prevalence seen* (M = 2.63, SD = 1.16) was assessed by asking: "In the past 12 months, how often have you seen hateful and offensive posts against racial, ethnic, or religious social groups in the social media platforms you use?" *Hate speech prevalence targeted* (M = 1.97, SD = 1.08) was measured through asking: "In the past 12 months, how often have you *personally* encountered hateful or offensive posts targeting your racial, ethnic, or religious identities in the social media platforms you use?" using a 6-point scale with endpoints of 1 (*never*: 0% of the posts) to 6 (*almost always*: 76%–100% of the posts).

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Results

Our results indicated that most participants were aware of Facebook (99.7%), YouTube (99.6%), Twitter (98.7%), Instagram (98.5%), TikTok (98.6%), Snapchat (95.9%), Messenger (94.1%), Reddit (84.2%), and WhatsApp (79.5%). However, a lower proportion of participants were aware of Discord (45.4%), Telegram (35.9%), and Signal (23.9%).

Our examination of which platforms U.S. adults considered to be "social media" (RQ1) indicated that Facebook (97.4%), Twitter (92.1%), Instagram (91.5%), Snapchat (81.4%), and TikTok (87.6%) were consistently seen as social media (see Figure 1). Reddit (62.7%) was also commonly seen as social media. However, there was a lack of consensus about whether YouTube (54.6%), Messenger (48.8%), WhatsApp (36.4%), Discord (25.8%), Telegram (17.6%), and Signal (10.7%) were social media.

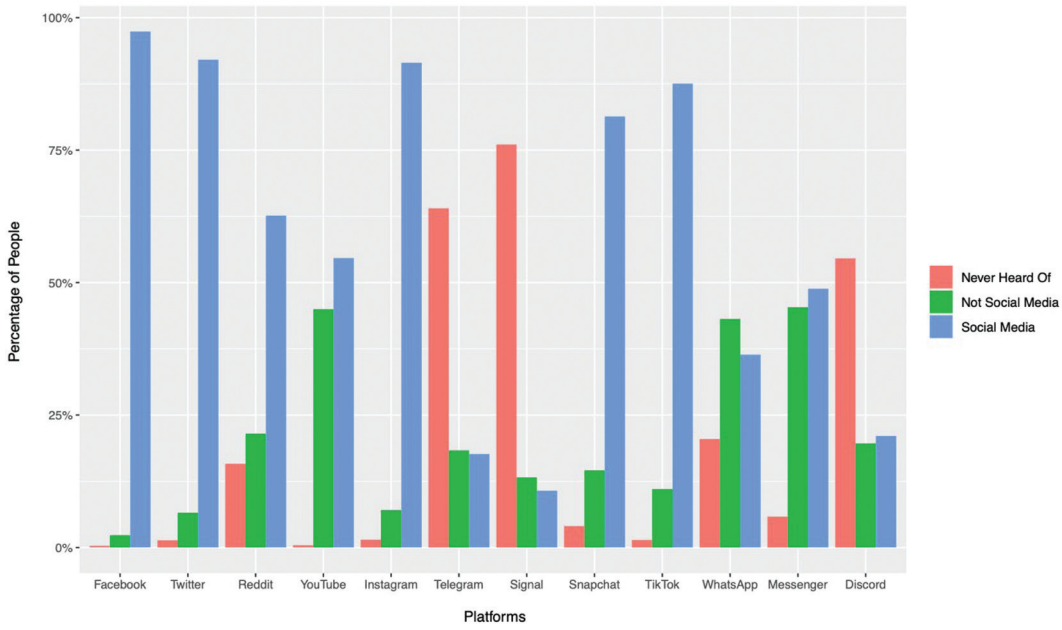
To examine the relationships between the platform identification variables, we treated each variable as binary ("social media" vs. "not social media," excluding "never heard of" responses). In turn, we conducted tetrachoric correlations (which measure the correlation between two binary variables) for each platform pair. Results suggested that when individuals perceive one platform as social media (vs. not social media), they were more likely to perceive other platforms in the same way (r_{tet} = .09–.87). In particular, people were very likely to evaluate messaging-centered platforms in the same way (i.e., Signal, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Discord; r_{tet} = .78–.87) and photo- or video-centered platforms in the same way (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok; r_{tet} = .73–.81). By contrast, results generally showed small–moderate relationships between viewing YouTube and other platforms as social media (vs. not social media; r_{tet} = .21–.44), suggesting it was viewed more independently (see Figure 2).

Next, we examined if demographic factors were related to which platforms were considered "social media" (RQ2). Binary logistic regressions were used to determine the effects of political identification, age, gender, education level, and income on the likelihood of viewing each platform as social media or not. We also included platform frequency to assess whether prior engagement with a particular platform related to whether people view that platform as social media. The results of each of the 12 platform models are visible in Tables S1a and S1b. Participants who identified as politically conservative were more likely to perceive two platforms (Telegram and Signal) as social media, but were less likely to perceive Instagram as social media. No differences were observed across gender in perceptions of whether a platform was social media or not. Younger participants were more likely to view a platform as social media for four platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and TikTok), whereas older participants were more likely to view a platform as social media for six platforms (Reddit, YouTube, Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp, and Messenger). Participants with higher levels of education were more likely to view five platforms as social media (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok), but less likely to view YouTube and WhatsApp as social media. Those with higher levels of income were more likely to view four platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Signal) as social media, but less likely to view Messenger as social media. Those with higher levels of platform frequency were more likely to view five platforms as social media (Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, Messenger, and YouTube) and less likely to view three platforms as social media (Signal, WhatsApp, and Discord). See supplemental materials for full results.

In addition, we examined if demographic factors were related to social media schemas (RQ3). Multiple regressions were used to examine who was more likely to have a broader view of social

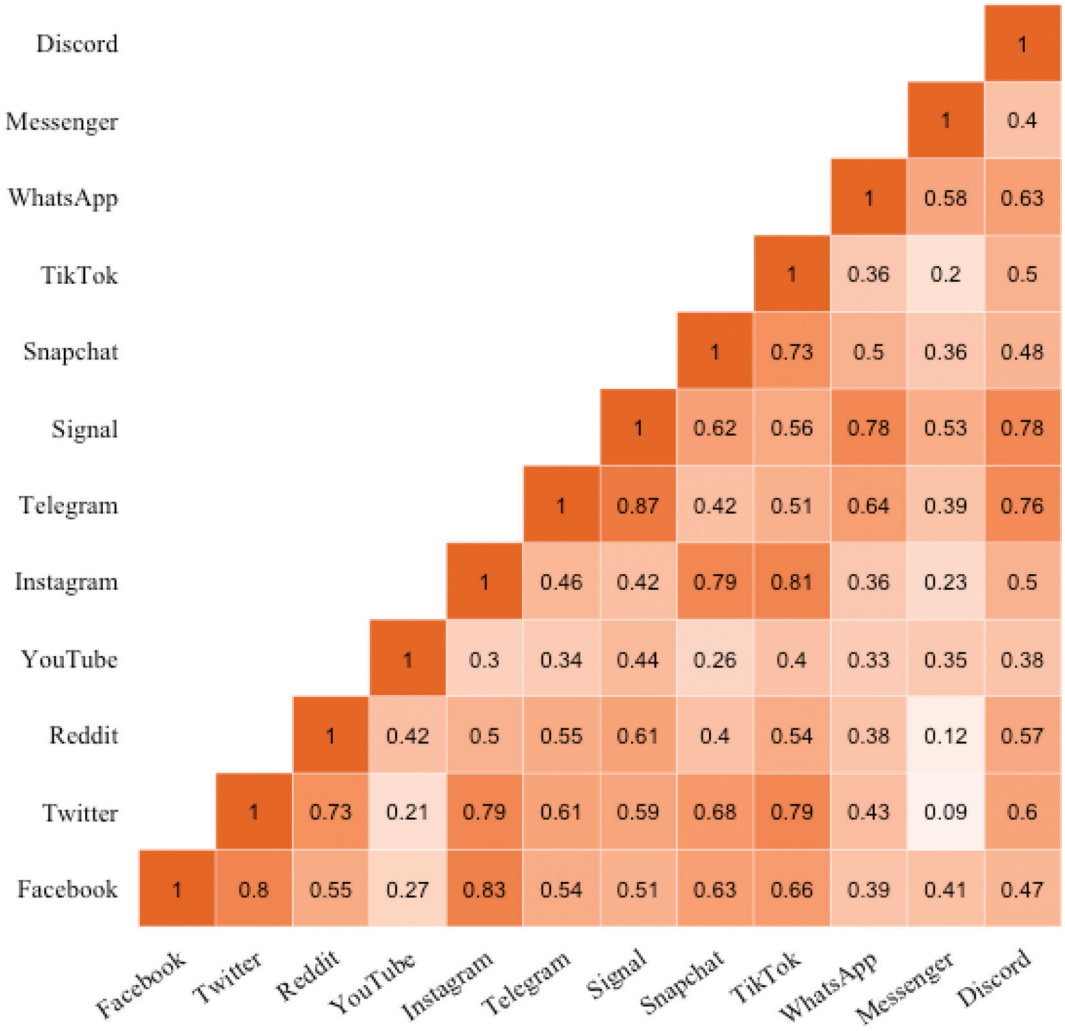
Figure 1

Percentage of U.S. Adults Who View 12 Platforms as "Social Media"



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Figure 2
Tetrachoric Correlation Table Between Social Media Identification Variables



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

media (i.e., social *media breadth*). Those with greater overall platform frequency, as well as those who were younger in age, identified as male, had higher income, and were more educated, exhibited broader social media schemas (see Table S2).

Finally, we examined whether social media breadth was related to perceptions of hate speech (RQ4). Regression models were conducted while controlling for overall platform frequency, platform awareness, and demographic variables (see Table 1). Results showed that breadth (*count*) was associated with perceiving a higher frequency of hate speech seen ($b = .002$, $p = .033$) and lower appropriateness of hate speech (i.e., hate speech norms; $b = -.04$, $p < .01$). However, social media breadth (*count*) was not associated with prevalence of hate speech targeted. Results also highlighted that overall platform frequency was associated with greater perceptions of hate speech prevalence (prevalence seen: $b = .16$; prevalence targeted: $b = .18$, $ps < .001$). As a robustness check, we ran parallel models using the proportion version of social media breadth, which revealed consistent results (see Table S4). See supplemental materials for additional exploratory models focused on perceptions of hate speech responsibility.

Discussion

Social media has been widely researched, discussed, and debated for decades, yet the diverse perceptions of what the term "social media" encompasses are often overlooked. This study investigated the degree of variability in the perception of social media from a nationally representative sample in the United States. Results revealed that six platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok) were widely viewed as "social media," whereas there was a lack of consensus about the other six that were measured (YouTube, Discord, WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, and Signal). Answering our first research question, we found highly varied perceptions of what platforms count as social media. These differing definitions highlight that the term "social media" may evoke different ideas when people discuss or navigate

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Table 1
Multiple Regressions Predicting Hate Speech Perceptions

	Norms		Prevalence seen		Prevalence targeted	
Predictor	*b*	95% CI	*b*	95% CI	*b*	95% CI
Social media breadth (count)	**−.04****	[−.09, −.04]	**.03***	[.03, .08]	.02	[.02, .06]
Platform awareness	**.07****	[.05, .13]	−.02	[−.06, .01]	.02	[−.01, .06]
Overall platform frequency	.03	[−.05, .09]	**.16*****	[.07, .19]	**.18*****	[.10, .22]
Political identification	**.07*****	[.05, .12]	**−.05****	[−.10, −.04]	−.01	[−.04, .02]
Age	**−.01*****	[−.14, −.13]	−.00	[−.02, −.01]	−.00	[−.02, −.01]
Gender	**−.21*****	[−.20, .03]	.09	[−.07, .14]	−.09	[−.14, .06]
Education	−.04	[−.09, .03]	−.03	[−.09, .02]	−.04	[−.09, .01]
Income	**−.03*****	[−.12, −.09]	−.01	[−.05, −.03]	**−.01***	[−.07, −.04]
R^2	.06		.03		.04	
Adjusted R^2	.06		.03		.04	
N	1,891		1,889		1,891	

Note. Unstandardized coefficients (*b*) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Significant coefficients are bolded.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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the current online landscape. This lack of consensus highlights the importance of examining the individualized perceptions of "social media" to properly understand—and measure—social media and its effects (Wolfers et al., 2025). Specific terminology and phrasing can alter the ways in which people perceive and form attitudes toward concepts (Hauser & Schwarz, 2018). This may lead to biased measurements of how social media is used and perceived, particularly given the high variability of common social media measures (Petropoulos Petalas et al., 2021).

What underlies "social media" schemas? Through personalized lenses, people may focus on different features, affordances, and/or characteristics (e.g., stories vs. messaging, text vs. video, norms vs. interfaces) in cognitively constructing what social media is—leading to different understandings of "social media." Results from the current study suggested that platforms with a masspersonal focus (e.g., newsfeeds, streams, or stories) were more likely to be viewed as social media. On the other hand, there was a lack of consensus for platforms that are commonly or colloquially described as "messaging" apps (e.g., Signal markets itself as a "messaging app"). This lack of consensus may reflect that more masspersonal social media platforms have been centralizing messaging components for many years now (Bayer et al., 2020). Because of the increasing integration of messaging in U.S. social platforms (e.g., Meta launching Messenger and integrating with Instagram), the lines between messaging apps and social media have been blurred (Hall, 2023). As such, the key role of messaging in contemporary communication may be influencing how individuals are deciding what constitutes "social media." At the same time, we also saw evidence to the contrary in the case of Snapchat. Specifically, participants were more likely to view Snapchat as social media (81%) compared with the other messaging-focused platforms measured. Hence, despite its messaging-centered basis, Snapchat was one of the most agreed-upon "social media" platforms, further illustrating the highly subjective nature of identification. Future investigations into perceived platform differences will be useful to understand why people may attribute "social media" characteristics to certain platforms rather than others.

Our second research question investigated whether demographic differences may also reflect differing opinions of which platforms count as social media. We found that individual differences in political identification, age, education, and income influenced whether one or more platforms was viewed as "social media" or not. Of note, these relationships occurred while accounting for the amount individuals used the platform personally. Those with higher levels of income were more likely to view five out of the 12 platforms (Twitter, Reddit, Instagram, Signal, and Messenger) as social media. In addition, those with higher levels of education were more likely to view seven platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and WhatsApp) as social media. Moreover, age was a strong predictor of identifications, such that younger individuals were more likely to define three platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok) as social media. On the other hand, older individuals were more likely to view six other platforms (Reddit, YouTube, Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp, and Messenger) as social media. Interestingly, Gottfried (2024) reported that the largest age gap for platform usage exists for Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok—with younger adults in the United States using these platforms at a far greater rate. These varied patterns highlight how demographic differences in usage may partly underpin the diverse understandings of social media.

Importantly, we also found that prior platform usage was a key factor influencing how social media was labeled by our sample. Our results indicated that higher platform frequency had divergent effects on social media identification. In some cases, it led people to be more likely to identify platforms as social media (Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, and Messenger), whereas in other cases it led people to be less likely to do so (Signal, WhatsApp, and Discord). These results indicate that frequency—via increased direct exposure—may give users (self-perceived) insight into what characteristics comprise that platform and match their "social media" definition. This increased exposure may make people more likely to view platforms as social media through more knowledge about how a given platform works—thereby clarifying whether it matches their general schema for "social media." Alternatively, more usage may also lead people to *not* think a platform is "social media" given discrepancies between their idea of social media and the characteristics or functions of the platform they know well. In either scenario, prior usage appears to be influencing whether people think a platform qualifies as "social media." Combined, our findings underline how users' unique explorations and evaluations

of the online ecosystem may contribute to divergent perceptions of "social media" as a whole.

In 2024, the acting U.S. Surgeon General Murthy proposed that, similar to cigarettes, social media platforms should have health warnings (Murthy, 2024). This suggestion sparked mixed reactions from social media researchers (APA, 2024; Fadel, 2024) and conversations about how to determine what qualifies as social media to enact social media policies (Nyce, 2024). For instance, Australia passed a law in 2025 to ban social media for children under the age of 16 years old, which has also garnered mixed reactions (Christensen et al., 2024; Stankov et al., 2025). As of the time of writing, the Australian government has not yet finalized the entire list of platforms that count as "social media" (eSafety Commissioner, 2025). However, the Minister for Communications for the Australian government has released a list of services that are *not* considered age-restricted platforms (e.g., "services that have the sole or primary purpose of enabling end-users to communicate by means of messaging, email, voice calling, or video calling"; Wells, 2025). Notably, two of the most discussed platforms that do not meet these criteria are TikTok and YouTube. Interestingly, our results indicated that TikTok is consistently viewed as social media by Americans. Conversely, views of YouTube, which has a similar video focus (including short videos like TikTok), lacked consensus. Past work has sometimes treated YouTube as a form of social media (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Khan, 2017). Other times, researchers have treated YouTube as a form of entertainment platform (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Möller et al., 2019). YouTube, which was created in the year 2005, has gone through many evolutions—from the first video being a simple "vlog" about a trip to the zoo to modern videos with high production costs. In some respects, YouTube has turned into a form of TV—but one that has retained some characteristics of classic social media (e.g., comments). This complicates its platform identity, which may also continue to change as it responds to the rise of short-form video in the broader ecosystem (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, and Reels). In any case, clearly not all platforms are perceived consistently in the United States, complicating the implementation of "social media" policy proposals.

Beyond considering individual differences in social media identification on their own, our study sought to test how views of the term "social media" may influence the ways in which people perceive the prevalence of social media behavior and content. We found that social media breadth—that is, holding a broader view of social media—was related to elevated perceptions of hate speech prevalence on social media. Individuals who held broader schemas were more likely to report (a) that they had seen more hate speech on social media and (b) that posting hate speech was inappropriate on social media. Our analyses controlled for overall platform frequency and awareness, providing evidence that differences in subjective "social media" schemas mattered beyond prior experience and knowledge. Although the effect sizes of these relationships were small, the findings suggest that social media schemas may relate to how participants answer questions about hate speech. More generally, these results raise the possibility that subjective views of "social media" can anchor how people think about—or at least answer questions about—what happens on social media. Of note, we operationalized social media breadth in two ways: (a) the *count* of platforms that are viewed as social media and (b) the *proportion* of platforms that are viewed as social media (out of the platforms that individuals are aware of). Although we found largely consistent results across operationalizations, future research should examine the validity of different ways to measure social media schemas.

Although our probability-based sample offers a unique look into social media perceptions in the United States, some limitations and future directions deserve attention. First, our study is exploratory and thus should be replicated and generalized with confirmatory research. Second, we measured "social media breadth" by focusing on 12 major platforms. Whereas this list captures a sizable share of the online ecosystem, future research should examine other platforms and technologies (e.g., video calls) that can feasibly be viewed as "social media." In addition, our study did not examine the precise features, affordances, or norms that contribute to social media schemas—and thus perceptions of whether platforms are social media or not. Future research should investigate the cognitive basis of social media schemas more directly, along with individuals' mental maps of the overall social media ecosystem. In doing so, researchers can identify what specific dimensions are influencing how users identify "social media" in their minds. In parallel, our study reinforces the importance of establishing clear guidelines for reporting social media measures in future studies (see Wolfers et al., 2025).

Future research can also examine the influence of more specific user experiences and knowledge, such as identification with communities within platforms (e.g., subreddits), on schemas. Social media users often navigate tailored environments of a given platform (e.g., "BookTok") that may shape the way in which they view the broader social landscape. Although we focused on the schemas that come with the term "social media," there are certain to be wide differences in the schemas tied to the vast online environments that people roam today (including outside the United States). Thus, our study reaffirms the need for more research into individuals' mental maps of their online social worlds. Measuring individuals' mental maps may more fully capture their unique experiences (i.e., the platforms they have inhabited), with the potential to reveal cognitive constraints that limit how—and where—people roam online.

Conclusion

Numerous research studies, along with untold numbers of everyday conversations, have focused on the societal implications of using social media. To fully understand the effects of social media, however, researchers must understand what schemas are in users' minds. We have suggested that cognitive schemas of what platforms count as social media may influence other perceptions related to social media. If two individuals have differing opinions of whether Reddit counts as social media, they may be discussing "social media" from very different assumptions (especially if one of them is a Redditor). Results from our nationally representative sample revealed that there are considerable differences in what the term "social media" means in the United States. We also provide preliminary evidence that broader or narrower schemas may influence how users think about what is occurring on social media. We found that broader schemas were associated with greater perceptions of hate speech prevalence. These results highlight the subjectivity of the term "social media," which has the potential to guide how people perceive the effects of social media on society.

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Furthermore, this subjectivity may impact how social media is discussed, from researchers to government policymakers. In other words, with or without a shared definition, the term "social media" will continue to matter in society.

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