

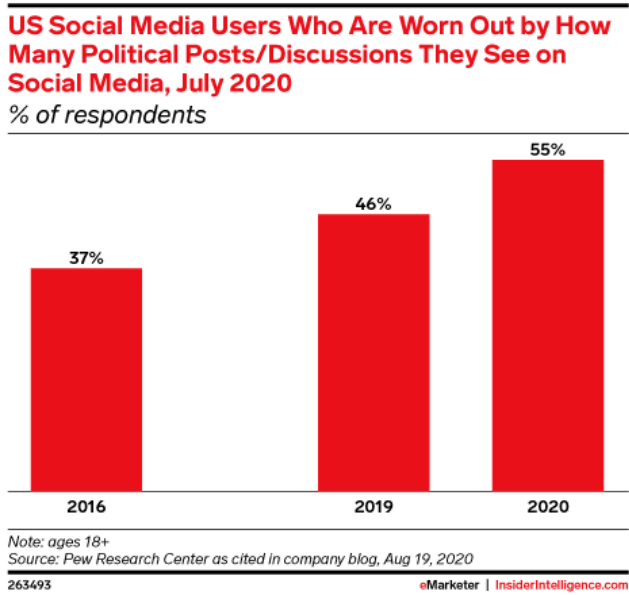
Politics didn't make people spend less time on social

Article

In the lead-up to the election, many social media users expressed growing exhaustion with the user experience due to the influx of political content. But those feelings of “election fatigue” didn’t cause most users to decrease their engagement on social.

According to a July 2020 Pew Research Center survey, 55% of US adult social media users said they were worn out by the number of political posts they saw on social platforms, up

from 46% of respondents in 2019 and 37% during the 2016 US presidential election. Meanwhile, the share of respondents who liked seeing lots of political posts fell from 20% in 2016 to 15% in 2020.

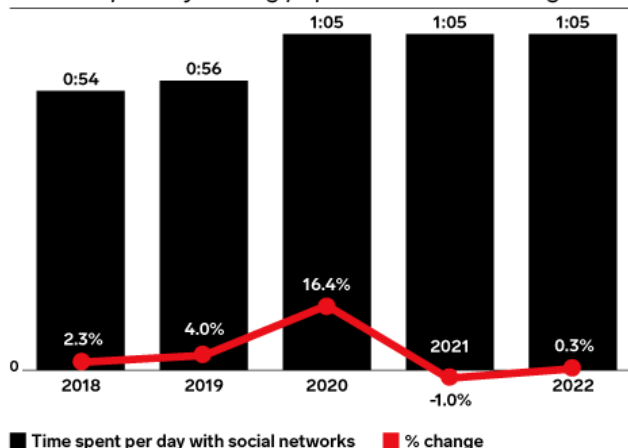


Despite this, both the number of monthly users and time spent on social platforms saw unexpected gains in 2020. According to our latest forecast, the number of US social network users rose by nearly 7 million last year to 212.1 million, representing the largest increase since 2016.

Meanwhile, average daily time spent on social networks among monthly US adult social media users grew by 13.4% to 1 hour, 30 minutes (1:30) in 2020. Growth in time spent among total US adults was even higher, at 16.4%. We expect that in 2021, US adults will spend 1:05 on social per day—on par with 2020.

Social Networks: Average Time Spent in the US, 2018-2022

hrs:mins per day among population and % change



Note: ages 18+; includes all time spent with social networks, regardless of multitasking; includes usage via desktop/laptop computers and mobile (smartphones and tablets)
Source: eMarketer, Jan 2021

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The pandemic is, of course, a major factor in the dramatic increase in time spent on social media. Stay-at-home and social distancing measures boosted engagement on social platforms, particularly in the early part of 2020, as people sought entertainment and human connection. That could have made up for any potential politics-related declines in usage that might have taken place without the pandemic bump.

But even as social media behaviors began to return to normal in the latter part of 2020, Q4 earnings reports from the major platforms indicate that engagement remained high. Why?

“Last year, there was a notable number of people who aspired to lessen their engagement on social media to get away from politics,” said Richard Tomasco Jr., vice president of Caravan Surveys at Engine Insights, part of media and marketing services company Engine. “But the public isn’t going to go backward in terms of their engagement and reliance on social platforms. They may want to, but at the end of the day, there’s just that human element that can’t be avoided.”

It’s true; despite how users may feel about it, politics, particularly divisive discourse, is one of the most reliable ways for the social platforms to generate usage and engagement. Their efforts to limit that content may end up having the unintended effect of sending their users elsewhere.

Case in point: former US President Donald Trump.

After Twitter permanently banned Trump's account following the January 6 riot on Capitol Hill, Trip Chowdhry, general manager at Global Equities Research, estimated that Twitter's revenues and engagement would both decline by about 15%. He likened the move to reddit's June 2020 decision to remove an unofficial subreddit dedicated to supporting Trump, which Chowdhry estimated caused a 57% decline in user engagement on the platform.

And Twitter isn't the only social platform in danger of a so-called post-Trump slump. In a November 2020 blog post, Facebook revealed that seven of the top 10 US Pages ranked by engagement from October 23 to 29, just ahead of the election, were political in some way. Trump's Page topped the list with 39.9 million likes, reactions, comments, and shares during that week.

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Report by Jasmine Enberg Feb 24, 2021

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