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Social media, markets and minors: A behavioral ethics perspective. The tension between protection and autonomy

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Social Media, Markets and Minors: A Behav- ioral Ethics Perspective

The tension between protection and autonomy

Barbara Engels / Jennifer Potthoff

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For reasons of better readability, this publication regularly uses grammatical gender. This explicitly refers to all gender identities

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Abstract

Social media has become a central infrastructure of adolescence, offering benefits such as social connection, informal learning, creative expression, and low-cost entrepreneurial opportunities, while simultaneously posing risks including depression, body image concerns, and opaque commercial persuasion. By combining behavioral business ethics with digital economics, this study explores how platform and creator incentives can be aligned with the well-being and developing autonomy of young people without undermining innovation.

Social media platforms, creators and influencers often exploit developmental vulnerabilities, creating potential market failures and undermining trust in digital markets. Ethical evaluation shows that protecting young people's autonomy and dignity requires categorical duties (deontological lens) such as prohibiting manipulative design, dark patterns, and covert monetization – combined with proportionate, welfare-maximizing interventions (utilitarian lens). Current EU and German frameworks provide guidance but leave enforcement gaps, particularly in design patterns, age assurance, and transparency in the creator economy. Effective policy measures include default “Young User Mode” settings, dual disclosure of influence and content provenance, targeted restrictions for high-risk advertising, and scaled media-literacy programs. Together, these policies realign incentives toward innovation-compatible, healthier engagement models, embedding youth well-being as a design constraint and strengthening trust in digital markets within a social market economy framework.

1 Introduction and key concepts

Social media is not a pastime but an infrastructure during adolescence. This study examines how to align the incentives of social media platforms and influencer ecosystems with the well-being and self-determination of young people without undermining innovation or legitimate business models. The following analysis combines behavioral business ethics with a perspective of digital economics to ethically analyze platform mechanisms and commercial practices that affect minors. The stance is pro-innovation and pro-business: platforms and creators generate social and economic value, while certain design choices and opaque commercial persuasion can create welfare-relevant risks for minors.

1.1 Digital adolescence between freedom and protection

Social media is no longer just a leisure activity. It is an ever-present environment in which large parts of socialization, identity formation, and emotional regulation now take place. In Germany, children and adolescents are starting to use social media at ever younger ages. Recent studies show that TikTok is used at least once a week by 10 per cent of 6- to 7-year-olds, 17 per cent of 8- to 9-year-olds, 46 per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds and 71 per cent of 12- to 13-year-olds (Feierabend et al., 2024).

German 15-year-olds report seven hours of daily screen time, making them among the most active users across OECD countries, with only Poland and Estonia reporting higher figures (OECD, 2025). A longitudinal study by the German Centre for Addiction Issues in Childhood and Adolescence (DZSKJ, 2025) shows that adolescents aged 10 to 17 years spend an average of 157 minutes per weekday and 227 minutes on weekends on social media like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.

This presence of social media can have negative consequences. More than 1.3 million German children and adolescents aged 10 to 17 show signs of risky or even pathological media use. Around 4.7 per cent are considered addicted (ibid.). Overall, more than one in four young people use social media in ways that threaten their mental well-being – more than double the share in 2019. Before the pandemic, 11.4 per cent of adolescents displayed such problematic patterns, compared to more than 25 per cent today, marking an increase of 126 per cent (ibid.).

Research has linked digital overuse to anxiety, depressive symptoms, sleep disorders (Brailovskaia et al., 2025; Primack et al., 2022; Rathod et al., 2022) and low self-esteem (Vincente-Benito / del Valle Ramirez-Duran, 2023). National data on German high school students shows that addictive use is a significant predictor of depressive symptoms (Leo et al., 2023). At the same time, a meta-analysis of 43 studies (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025) underlines the complexity of this web of effects: while there is evidence connecting social media use with depression and anxiety, there are also contrary findings such as enhanced social support and reduced isolation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, the effects of social media use on mental health were mixed, including neutral, negative, and positive impacts.

This evidence illustrates that social media platforms are not just neutral tools, but business systems engineered to shape behavior in ways that raise ethical questions especially when it comes to young people, since they are particularly vulnerable. The high density of biological, psychological and social developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence, such as building relationships or developing impulse control, makes these phases of life particularly susceptible to the development of mental disorders (Brailovskaia et al., 2025).

1.2 Key concepts: social media, platforms, and Creator Economy

Social media are digital platforms that allow users to create and share content and, in doing so, form and maintain social relationships (Schmidt/Taddicken, 2017). They enable the (near-)real-time exchange of information, opinions, images, videos and other media, spanning social networking services (e.g., Instagram, Facebook), discussion platforms (e.g., Reddit), user-generated video platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok) and professional networks (e.g., LinkedIn). Many messaging apps nowadays also mirror social networks, such as Telegram with public channels and large group chats, and WhatsApp with increasingly broadcast-like features (cf. Brailovskaia et al., 2025). A common feature across these services is the underlying business model: platforms monetize attention and data by analyzing usage to infer attributes, preferences and behavioral patterns, delivering individualized content, predicting user behavior and serving targeted advertising. Social media platforms are hence multi-sided markets connecting distinct user groups (Bleier et al., 2024). According to market theory, platforms function as intermediaries that create value by reducing coordination costs across sides; each additional user increases value for others through network effects (e.g., more creators attract more users and advertisers; Jia et al., 2019). This structure enables platforms to monetize through advertising, where revenue depends heavily on ad impressions and the ability to target users effectively, capacities that scale with deeper engagement (Dogruel, 2024).

Central to these platforms are hence mechanisms designed to maximize **engagement**. Three key design features drive attention:

- algorithmic ranking, which surfaces content most likely to engage users,
- friction-reducing interfaces (e.g., infinite scroll, autoplay videos), which minimize effort needed to consume more content, thus extending sessions,
- variable-reward feedback: likes, comments, streaks, and notification impulses that mimic reward systems and reinforce usage (Bhargava/Velasquez, 2020, 327).

Empirical studies show that minors are particularly susceptible to these designs, as their developing cognitive control and heightened responsiveness to social cues make disengagement more difficult (APA, 2024).

The **Creator-Economy**, also referred to as Influencer Economy, emerges as a distinct market segment within this ecosystem. Creators (influencers) produce content and build audiences like other creators (e.g. artists, musicians) but they also monetize their content through sponsorship deals, brand partnerships, and affiliate marketing. Entry barriers are low, enabling entrepreneurship and new income streams, which is particularly attractive for young people (Nußbaum/Potthoff, 2024; Engels, 2023). Especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, but also for larger ones, influencer marketing provides efficient customer access.

Yet, **information asymmetry** is prevalent: followers, especially young ones, cannot always discern when content is commercialized or edited, leading to misjudgments about authenticity or intent. This is due, on the one hand, to the lack of media literacy (insufficient willingness and ability to critically question advertising) among children and young people (Wilcox et al., 2004) and, on the other hand, to empirically proven gaps in the labelling of advertising. A study of 576 influencer profiles in the EU shows that only 20 per cent of profiles clearly label advertising as such (Umweltbundesamt, 2024). This opaque environment can foster misleading perceptions and is a classic case of hidden information problems in markets.

These dynamics are enhanced by the rise of **Artificial Intelligence** (AI). AI-based recommender systems quietly decide which posts appear next by estimating what will keep a person watching, tapping, or sharing. On the commercial side, advertising tools learn which messages and formats a user is most likely to respond to and automatically show variations with a higher predicted effect (Gao et al., 2023). As a result, the line between organic content and advertising becomes harder to see: sponsored posts, shoppable videos, affiliate links, and creator partnerships are presented in the same style and cadence as ordinary posts, which makes commercial intent less transparent, especially for young users.

Lastly, the **externalities and market power** of these systems warrant scrutiny. Individual usage choices like extended screen time and exposure to idealized images impose societal costs such as compromised sleep, academic distraction, or body image concerns that are not internalized by platforms or creators. Moreover, data advantages, network effects, and economies of scale concentrate power and platforms therefore lack incentives to self-regulate toward safer defaults (Ong/Toh, 2023). Viral amplification of behaviors such as comparison, validation-seeking, and emotional reactivity illustrates how platform dynamics can systemically spread patterns that serve corporate interests but potentially undermine youth well-being.

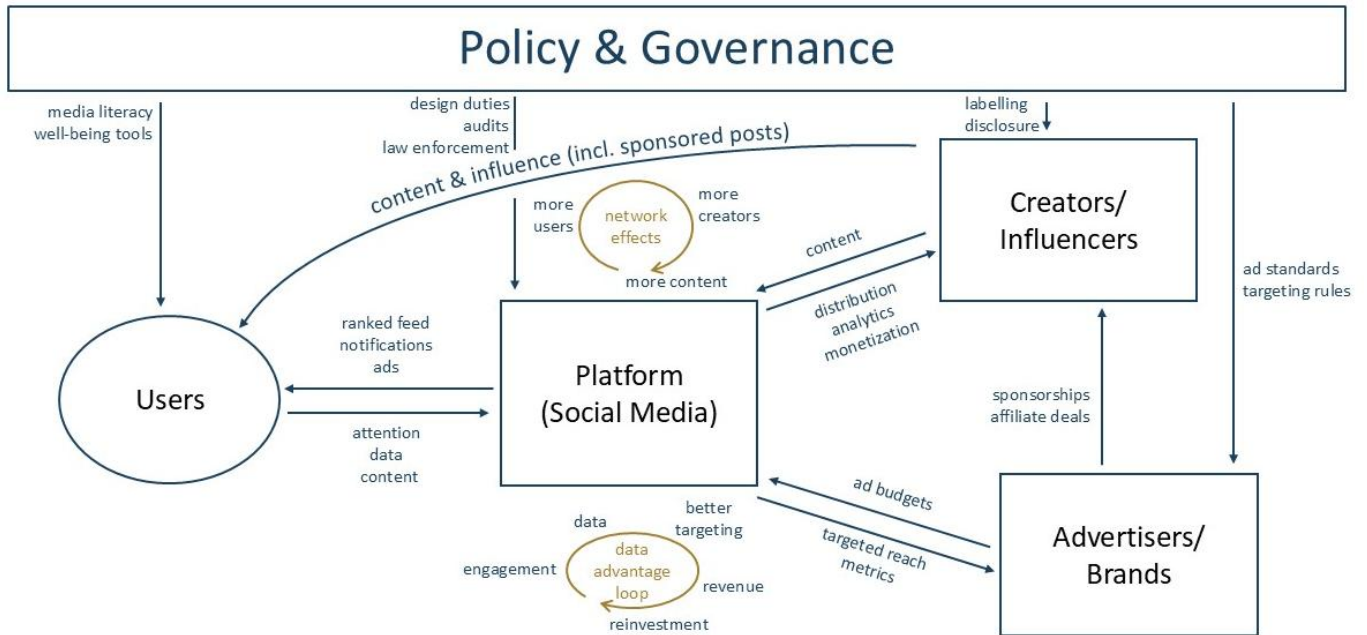
Particularly in the case of adolescents, these design choices exploit cognitive vulnerabilities and emotional sensitivity in ways that can lead to dependency and distorted self-image (see chapter 2). This raises fundamental ethical questions about the legitimacy of such influence, which will be explored in detail throughout the following chapters. What duties do social media platforms and influencers have towards minors? How should we balance adolescents' autonomy and freedom of expression with their need for protection?

Based on the dual approach of behavioral business ethics and digital economics and the mentioned key concepts, the study

- synthesizes empirical evidence on benefits and harms of social media use (chapter 2),
- provides an ethical analysis (deontological and utilitarian) in the context of social media (chapter 3),
- maps the existing legal landscape at EU and German level and derives proportionate policy options (chapter 4).

The objective of this study is to shed an ethical light on social media practices and thereby derive implementable and innovation-friendly recommendations for policymakers. Figure 1-1 depicts the social media dynamics that are to be ethically analyzed.

Figure 1-1: Social media dynamics



Source: Author's own representation

2 Effects of social media use

The expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed patterns of communication, information exchange, and social participation. The societal impact extends far beyond the direct users, generating positive and negative effects that affect third parties and collective good. Table 2 1 provides a summarizing overview of the positive and negative effects considered most significant based on their impact and scope.

Positive effects of social media have been documented across multiple domains. From a sociological perspective, social media platforms lower the barriers to forming and maintaining relationships, thereby strengthening both the bonding of social capital (connections within close networks) and the bridging of social capital (connections across different social groups). These effects can be particularly beneficial for individuals in geographically remote areas or for marginalized groups whose offline social environments offer limited support (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). Social media also facilitates the rapid spread of information which can be relevant especially in times of crisis, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital platforms enabled not only real-time health communication but also remote work, education, and civic activism.

In the psychological domain, online communities can serve as safe spaces for the discussion of sensitive topics such as mental health or sexual identity, allowing users to exchange experiences anonymously and to find access to a peer support network and emotional support (Naslund et al., 2021). Research shows that participation in such communities can reduce feelings of isolation and can improve mental health and perceived well-being, particularly among the LGBTQ+ youth (Berger et al., 2022) and among individuals with impaired social functioning or mental illness (Naslund et al., 2021).

In the field of education, social media can function as an informal learning environment, enhance collaboration skills and access to educational resources outside traditional classrooms. For instance, research on learning and social network sites such as Facebook underlines the platforms' opportunities for interaction, collaboration, information and resource sharing (Mazman/Usluel, 2010), participation and critical thinking (Mason/Rennie, 2007; Ajjan/Hartshorne, 2008), peer support and communication about course content and assessment (DiVall/Kirwin, 2012) and inter-cultural language learning (Mills, 2011).

Economically, social media also enables entrepreneurship. Social media allows entrepreneurs to build and leverage extensive online networks, increasing access to information, resources, and potential customers. This expanded social capital facilitates entrepreneurial entry and opportunity identification, especially for those with limited offline networks (Wang et al., 2020). In this context, social media is especially empowering for disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, rural populations), providing access to entrepreneurial opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible due to geographic or social barriers (Brahem/Boussema, 2022). Also, platforms oftentimes offer low-cost or free marketing channels, thus enabling small businesses and creators to reach large audiences, test ideas, and interact directly with customers. This reduces fixed costs and allows rapid feedback and adaptation (Sharma, 2024).

Negative effects have become increasingly salient, especially among young users. Algorithmically optimized content feeds can create echo chambers and filter bubbles, foster (political) polarization, amplify misinformation, and erode trust in democratic institutions (Nußbaum/Potthoff, 2024).

Psychologically, as noted in chapter 1, problematic or excessive social media use is linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, reduced self-esteem, and body image concerns (Primack et al., 2022; Rathod et al., 2022; Vincente-Benito/del Valle Ramirez-Duran, 2023). Furthermore, online social comparison can erode adolescents' self-esteem, especially among girls (Prieler et al., 2021). Adolescents frequently compare themselves to others' idealized posts: Upward comparisons (seeing others as better off) are linked to immediate drops in self-esteem, while downward comparisons (seeing oneself as better off) can temporarily boost it, though these are less common (ibid.). Passive consumption (scrolling, viewing others' posts) is more strongly associated with envy and lower self-worth than active engagement (posting, interacting), which can sometimes have positive effects (Nguyen et al., 2025). The sensitive developmental stage of adolescence amplifies these harms, since teenagers are biologically and psychologically primed to seek peer approval.

While social media can foster informal learning and collaboration, it also carries risks for adolescents in educational contexts: Constant notifications and multitasking may distract from schoolwork, undermining attention and academic performance. Moreover, the rapid consumption of online content often promotes superficial information processing rather than critical engagement and deep learning (Kokoc, 2021; Kolhar et al., 2021). In economic terms, these effects impose substantial social costs, including a diminished quality of public discourse.

Another negative externality stems from opaque commercial persuasion. If advertising and organic content blur, minors may overestimate peer approval and underestimate commercial intent, fostering materialistic attitudes and impulsive spending. A recent study shows that adolescents are highly susceptible to influencer marketing, with about half of over 1,000 respondents having purchased products which had been promoted by their (favorite) influencers. About 25 per cent of the respondents report regular negative experiences due to influencer marketing such as impulse purchases or social conflicts (Fraunhofer Institut, 2024).

Approximately 30 to 40 per cent of the advertising revenue generated from three social media platforms analyzed in a US-American study is attributable to young people (Raffoul et al., 2023).

AI intensifies both sides of the ledger. It improves relevance, accessibility, and safety in many situations, for example by surfacing helpful communities, adding captions, or filtering clearly harmful material more quickly. At the same time, AI-driven ranking can steer adolescents toward ever more stimulating or idealized material, deepen so-called rabbit holes, and personalize persuasive appeals that are hard to recognize as such. Generative tools make polished or retouched media cheaper and faster to produce. In economic terms, these mechanisms raise search efficiency for users and advertisers, but they also increase the risk that commercial messages become indistinguishable from ordinary content and lead to impulsive spending.

Table 2-1: Positive and negative effects of social media use on (young) people

| Domain | Positive | Negative |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| Sociological & political | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower barriers to forming and maintaining relationships • Strengthening of bonding and bridging social capital • Support for marginalized groups • Rapid dissemination of information (real-time health communication, remote work, education, civic activism) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Algorithmic feeds foster echo chambers and filter bubbles • Amplification of misinformation and polarization • Erosion of trust in democratic institutions |
| Psychological | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online communities as safe spaces (mental health, sexual identity etc.) through emotional peer-to-peer support • Reduced isolation and improved well-being for people with impaired social functioning or (mental) illnesses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive use linked to anxiety, depression, sleep problems, reduced self-esteem, body image concerns |
| Educational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal learning environment • Space for interaction, collaboration, information/resource sharing, intercultural learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distraction and reduced attention span • Superficial information processing • Possible barrier to the development of analytical skills and critical thinking |
| Economic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for entrepreneurship • Audience building for creators • Low-cost advertising for SMEs; small-scale testing of business ideas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blurred boundaries between advertising and organic content • Susceptibility of vulnerable adolescents to influencer marketing (impulse purchases, social conflicts) |

Source: Author's own representation

From a policy perspective, the effects of social media are asymmetrical: while the benefits are diffuse and often individually experienced, harms concentrate among vulnerable groups, particularly adolescents, who

have limited capacity for self-protection in digital environments shaped by persuasive design and attention-maximizing algorithms (APA, 2024). Importantly, the negative effects are not random side effects but are structurally embedded in the commercial logic of most platform business models, which rely on prolonged user engagement to generate advertising revenue (Dogruel, 2024) (see chapter 1).

The dual nature of social media's impact creates a governance dilemma: measures aimed at mitigating negative effects – such as restricting addictive design features, moderating harmful content, or enforcing age verification – may infringe on civil liberties, including privacy rights and freedom of expression. Conversely, prioritizing unrestricted digital freedom includes the risk of intensifying harm, especially for those least equipped to manage the risks. Empirical evidence thus underscores the core tension in regulating digital space: the challenge does not lie in identifying whether effects exist – they clearly do – but in determining the acceptable balance between maximizing public benefits and minimizing societal costs without undermining fundamental rights. Because the underlying profit motive of companies is per se legitimate, the regulatory objective is not to punish firms but to realign incentives where social and economic optima diverge – with clear, predictable and innovation-friendly guardrails. The net impact of social media on any given young person also depends on individual factors such as their psychological profile, usage patterns, media literacy and offline support system, which underlines the necessity of a balanced approach.

3 Ethical analysis of social media dynamics

An ethical lens is indispensable for understanding social media dynamics. Platforms are not neutral infrastructures but deliberately designed environments that shape user behavior in ways with far-reaching consequences for autonomy, dignity, and well-being. Because minors represent a particularly vulnerable group, their exposure to persuasive design choices and commercial incentives demands scrutiny not only from an economic, but also from a moral perspective. Two major ethical theories – deontology and utilitarianism – provide complementary ways of evaluating the responsibilities of platforms, creators, and policymakers.

3.1 Deontological analysis: autonomy and dignity as non-negotiable principles

Deontological ethics evaluates moral actions based on duties, norms, and rights, rather than on the consequences they produce. The term derives from the Greek word “deon”, meaning “duty” or “obligation” (Black, 2014). From this perspective, certain actions are right or wrong in themselves, regardless of whether their outcomes are desirable or undesirable (Kranak, 2020). The guiding questions are: “What makes an action right or wrong?” and “Which actions are we morally required – or forbidden – to perform?”. The most influential proponent of this theory is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, whose approach is often referred to as “Kantian ethics” or “Kantianism”. Kant's categorical imperative states: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Krüger/Rapp, 2006). This principle emphasizes that the moral quality lies in the action itself, not in its potential consequences. This logic is embedded in normative frameworks such as the German Basic Law. Article 1(1) declares: “The dignity of a human being is inviolable. To respect and protect it is the obligation of all state authority” (Federal Government, 2020). Consequently, every human being must always be treated as an end in itself, never solely as a means; that means that actions that violate human dignity are forbidden even if they could maximize the overall welfare.

Applied to digital environments, this principle suggests that business models or design practices that exploit users purely as tools for maximizing profit are inherently unethical, no matter how beneficial their side effects may appear. In the context of social media, manipulative and addictive design practices directly conflict with this principle. Personalized algorithms that exploit emotional triggers, infinite scroll mechanisms that deliberately suppress natural stopping cues, or variable-reward loops (likes, streaks, push notifications) that condition behavior through intermittent reinforcement all exemplify cases where users' vulnerabilities are deliberately targeted. Particularly for children and adolescents, whose cognitive control is still developing and whose responsiveness to social cues is heightened (APA, 2024), these practices undermine autonomy. Rather than enabling self-determined use, they secretly steer behavior in ways that maximize engagement and advertising revenue. From a Kantian perspective, this amounts to instrumentalization: users are reduced to engagement metrics and monetizable data points. Such practices violate the duty to respect individuals as rational agents with the right to make informed, uncoerced decisions. Even if they provide entertainment or economic value, they remain morally impermissible.

This reasoning justifies a degree of paternalism. Limiting certain freedoms, such as unrestricted access to manipulative features or potentially harmful content, is ethically necessary when those "freedoms" in practice facilitate exploitation. Protecting autonomy sometimes requires restricting options that are designed to erode autonomy itself. Thus, a deontological view would mandate that platforms adopt strict duties:

- **Duty to respect and support autonomy:** Deontological ethics would urge respecting the adolescents' agency, rights to information and capacity for self-determined decision-making. This includes full transparency and the right to know when they are being advertised to or influenced. Platforms need to provide truthful, prominent ad disclosures so that commercial persuasion is never hidden;
- **Duty to enable informed choice and privacy by default:** Deontologically, companies should also obtain meaningful consent for data collection. Transparent communication about data collection and algorithmic processes is crucial; yet it is important to not burden adolescents with legalistic choices they cannot be expected to understand. Private accounts and limited data tracking by default should be mandative;
- **Duty to avoid manipulation and instrumentalization:** Platforms must never treat (young) people merely as means to commercial ends. This prohibits covert manipulative design such as dark patterns, hidden nudges or engagement-maximizing feedback loops. Specially designing addictive features targeted at kids violates their dignity and fails a duty of care. Platforms therefore have a duty not to exploit the imbalance in maturity and need to avoid covert manipulative or addictive design features and instead set up privacy- and safety-friendly defaults ("child-safe" settings) that safeguard dignity and autonomy and protect vulnerable groups without requiring active configuration;
- **Duty of equal respect and fairness:** Deontologically, exploiting structural power asymmetry, where corporations wield vast behavioral data and AI capacities against adolescents, violates the duty of recognition, respect and treating all people as ends in themselves.

Unlike utilitarian balancing, these duties are categorical: they do not depend on calculations of costs and benefits, but on inviolable principles of human dignity. For Kantian ethics, the value of respecting autonomy outweighs corporate claims to design freedom or profit motives. This lens thus supports strong, enforceable obligations for social media companies, not flexible guidelines or voluntary codes.

3.2 Utilitarian (teleological) analysis: maximizing well-being, minimizing harm

Whereas deontological ethics focuses on duties, teleology judges the morality of an action primarily by its outcomes. The most well-known form of this ethical theory is utilitarianism, which was developed by the British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1842) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) (cf. Sweet/Bentham, 2020). The term “utilitarianism” derives from the Latin word “utilitas”, meaning utility or usefulness. According to the teleological approach, an action is morally right if it maximizes positive effects such as pleasure, satisfaction, or well-being for all those affected, while minimizing harm or suffering. The guiding principle is to create the greatest happiness or utility for the greatest number of people (Bentham, 1789). Utilitarianism hence evaluates actions by their consequences for overall well-being. Its dual orientation (Höffe, 2008) towards positive utilitarianism (increasing pleasure and satisfaction) and negative utilitarianism (reducing pain and harm) provides a nuanced framework for assessing social media.

From a **positive utilitarian perspective**, social media platforms can generate substantial benefits. They enable new forms of social connection, facilitate creativity, and offer opportunities for learning and self-expression. Algorithms could, in principle, be designed to promote content that strengthens communities, encourages constructive dialogue, and provides access to reliable information. For marginalized groups, online communities can provide validation, safety, and a sense of belonging otherwise unavailable offline. During the Covid-19 pandemic, such positive aspects helped many adolescents to stay connected and reduce isolation (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025). The Creator Economy also brings economic opportunities. Many young people find careers or creative fulfillment online, and (small) businesses can efficiently reach audiences via influencers and social platforms (Nußbaum/Potthoff, 2024; Engels, 2023). These innovations drive economic growth and can improve people’s quality of life. A pro-innovation utilitarian would note that completely prohibiting the use of social media towards the youth could foreclose these real positives, possibly resulting in a net loss of welfare.

From a **negative utilitarian perspective**, however, the risks of social media are evident (chapter 2). A growing body of psychological research documents the adverse effects of excessive or addictive use: higher risks of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep disorders (Primack et al., 2022; Rathod et al., 2022), as well as low self-esteem linked to social comparison (Vincente-Benito / del Valle Ramirez-Duran, 2023). These not only diminish the well-being of the affected young people but also have broader repercussions like burdening mental health services and reducing productivity and educational outcomes. A utilitarian analysis highlights that many of these costs are externalities: the platforms reap profits from high engagement, but the mental health costs are borne by the individuals, families, and public health systems. As a result, platforms currently lack the incentive to reduce those harms. This is a market failure since what maximizes company profit (endless engagement) does not maximize collective well-being. For example, if endless scrolling or algorithmic rabbit holes lead teens into depression, the platform does not internalize that loss of well-being. Utilitarian ethics would call for correcting this imbalance, through intervention or design changes, so that the outcome is a higher total welfare even if platform metrics like time-spent on social media or ad impressions are a bit lower.

Importantly, according to the utilitarian view, it is not inherently “bad” that a company aims to achieve engagement if that engagement can be rendered largely harmless or even beneficial, but it becomes problematic when engagement-at-all-cost comes at the expense of other’s well-being. Achieving a more optimal balance might involve introducing friction to curb extreme use or filtering out especially harmful content from

adolescent feeds. If such measures reduce anxiety, depression, and other harm significantly while only minimally reducing entertainment or business revenue, the net utilitarian gain is clear.

In sum, a utilitarian ethical view does not demonize social media, but it highlights that current incentive structures lead to excesses that reduce overall welfare. The utilitarian calculus thus requires interventions that maximize the positive potential while minimizing harm. In practice, this entails:

- Reducing compulsive overuse by restricting autoplay functions and infinite scroll for minors;
- Enhancing safety through effective content moderation, age-appropriate protections, and limits on persuasive algorithms that exploit vulnerabilities;
- Providing digital well-being tools (time limits, dashboards, screen-time reminders) as default features, not optional add-ons;
- Ensuring transparency and user control over data, thereby reducing privacy-related harms.

In the influencer ecosystem, utilitarian ethics favors measures such as clear advertising disclosure, the promotion of educational and socially beneficial content, and calibrated restrictions on features that disproportionately harm young users. These steps increase total welfare while preserving legitimate opportunities for entrepreneurship and commercial communication.

Taken together, deontological and utilitarian perspectives highlight the necessity of protecting young users from manipulative practices but justify this necessity in different ways. Deontology stresses absolute duties: respect for dignity requires strict prohibitions on exploitative design and enforceable obligations for companies. Utilitarianism stresses proportional, evidence-based interventions: policies should optimize aggregate welfare, balancing benefits and harms as new evidence emerges.

A comprehensive ethical framework should integrate both:

- Deontological safeguards ensure that certain red lines – such as covert manipulation or the violation of autonomy – cannot be crossed, regardless of potential benefits.
- Utilitarian assessments guide the proportional calibration of interventions, ensuring that positive aspects like creativity, entrepreneurship, and community remain intact while risks are minimized.

Such an integrated approach also underscores the role of complementary strategies beyond regulation: digital education, media literacy, and mental health support can enhance resilience, empower young users, and reinforce their ability to navigate digital environments responsibly.

3.3 Aligning corporate and individual responsibility

Both ethical perspectives converge on a key point: social media companies carry a substantial responsibility for the well-being of young users, given their power to shape behavior:

- In deontological terms, corporate responsibility is clear: social media companies and influencers have direct duties to respect adolescents' autonomy, protect them from manipulation, ensure informed consent, and treat them as ends in themselves.

- From a utilitarian perspective, this corporate responsibility is simply the path to a greater good since interventions that reduce harm and promote healthier use patterns also maximize collective welfare in the long run.

This does not absolve others of responsibility. Parents must guide, schools should educate, and young people themselves have agency, yet platform design and policy exert outsized influence. The line between individual and corporate responsibility should be drawn by capacity and knowledge. Children have limited ability to self-regulation, especially when facing sophisticated algorithms, so expecting them to bear full responsibility for any harm (e.g. by saying “just log off if it’s bad for you”) is neither realistic nor ethical. Corporations, by contrast, possess evidence of these harms, often revealed by their own data scientists or by external research, and they have the capacity to change the environment. Greater responsibility falls on the side with greater power.

An ethical approach also values the agency and rights of young people. Social media can empower youth voices and should not be overly paternalistic. The challenge is finding ethical boundaries: It might not be ethically questionable to generally ban 15-year-olds from a platform to protect them from potential harm. Instead, one could apply less intrusive means such as age-appropriate design. Ethically, this means shaping the environment so that making healthy choices is the default (nudging). For example, a platform might default accounts of under 16 years old users to a mode that hides vanity metrics like follower counts to reduce social pressure, while still allowing the teens to share and communicate. In this way, the youth’s freedom is respected since they can at a later age choose to turn on these features, yet the platform has discharged a duty of care during the vulnerable period (see also the recommendations of Brailovskaia et al., 2025). Moreover, accessible reporting and default feedback mechanisms on social media usage would allow young users to flag harmful content, providing an additional layer of protection consistent with ethical duties. Importantly, such protective mechanisms should not only be reactive but designed proactively into the architecture of algorithms and interfaces.

Nonetheless, adolescents themselves should be recognized not only as passive recipients of protection but as stakeholders in platform governance. Youth parliaments or councils and participatory evaluation processes can strengthen their sense of autonomy and can ensure that interventions are not merely paternalistic but co-created with those who are most affected. For instance, 39 per cent of the 14- and 15-year-olds support a social media ban for adolescents younger than 16 years old (ifo Institute, 2025) even if they would be most affected by it.

Influencers and content creators also bear ethical obligations. Given their sway over young fans, they should avoid exploitation – for instance, clearly disclosing advertisements and not promoting harmful products and overconsumption or unrealistic lifestyles. They cannot only shape a more ethical culture by resisting manipulative sales tactics but also by actively discouraging impulsive consumption and promoting sustainable or non-material values like some political influencers like Luisa Neubauer already do. The principle of fidelity suggests that if a teen follows an influencer for authentic content, disguising a commercial agenda betrays that trust. Encouragingly, many creators and platform policies are starting to acknowledge this, but as noted, compliance remains low (Umweltbundesamt, 2024) even though industry associations such as the German Advertising Council and the German Association for the Digital Economy (BVDW) have already issued codes of conduct demanding transparency and accountability in influencer marketing (BVDW, 2023).

Ultimately, aligning corporate and individual responsibility requires acknowledging asymmetries of power and capacity. Adolescents must be recognized as rights-bearing agents rather than only as passive targets of protection, yet corporations and influencers cannot escape heightened duties of care given their superior knowledge and influence. Ethical responsibility in this field is therefore not a zero-sum game but a layered framework: parents, schools, platforms, and influencers all cover responsibility, but those with the greatest power to shape digital environments bear the greatest obligation to safeguard them. This raises a central question: how can such ethical imperatives be operationalized through governance structures, incentives, and regulation?

4 Policies for an ethical and economically sound governance of social media

Policymakers have begun to respond to the challenges posed by youth social media use by updating laws and regulations. This chapter maps the existing legal framework in the European Union and Germany relevant to protecting minors from the negative effects presented in chapter 2 and 3 and then discusses policy options to better align platforms' incentives with youth well-being in an innovation-friendly way. The goal is to identify proportionate measures – interventions that effectively mitigate risks to young people while preserving the benefits of social media and the viability of digital business models.

4.1 Current EU regulations and initiatives

At the EU level, several regulations and directives address aspects of social media and minors. The **Digital Services Act** (DSA) imposes obligations on online intermediaries and platforms to create a safer digital environment (European Union, 2024). It has specific provisions for the protection of minors: Article 28 says that online platforms that can be used by minors need to make sure their services offer a high level of privacy, safety and security to young users (cf. European Commission, 2023). Notably, the DSA bans targeted advertising to children based on personal data profiling: platforms that are “aware with reasonable certainty” that a user is a minor may no longer serve behaviorally targeted ads to that user. The DSA also introduces transparency rules for all online advertising. Ads must be clearly labeled as such, and users should be able to see why they were targeted, which also helps minors recognize sponsored content. For very large online platforms (VLOPs; those with over 45 million EU users), the DSA requires annual risk assessments, including an analysis of systemic risks to minors' mental health, safety, and rights. Platforms must then put in place “effective mitigation measures” for identified risks. The European Commission has suggested measures like age verification systems, parental control tools, and enhanced content moderation as ways to mitigate risks to minors (European Commission, 2023). Another DSA mandate is to avoid “dark patterns” (manipulative interface design) that could mislead any users, including minors, into making unintended choices – for example, making it as easy to disable recommendations or delete an account as it is to sign up. These provisions already map closely to deontological “do-not-cross” duties and to utilitarian outcome governance.

The **General Data Protection Regulation** (GDPR) which is primarily about data privacy, includes specific protections for children's data (European Union, 2016). EU Member States set a digital age of consent (between 13 and 16 years) for signing up to online services without parental approval. In Germany, this age is 16. This means platforms should not process personal data of children under the age of 16 for profiling or personalized services without parental consent. In practice, enforcement is tricky since age verification is challenging,

but the principle that children merit special data protection applies. The GDPR also emphasizes clear privacy notices: ideally, companies should provide child-friendly explanations of how data is used.

Beyond the DSA and the GDPR, the **Unfair Commercial Practices Directive** (UCPD), an EU consumer protection law, prohibits misleading or aggressive marketing practices. Under the UCPD, advertising that is hidden or not clearly identifiable as advertising is unlawful, as is the direct exhortation to children to buy products. National consumer authorities (often in coordination with the EU) have used this to pursue influencers or advertisers who fail to label ads. The recent EU sweep of influencer posts (cf. Umweltbundesamt, 2024) was part of checking compliance with UCPD requirements in social media. The finding that only 20 per cent of influencers clearly disclosed their ads shows a gap between law and practice. As a result, the European Commission and consumer protection authorities have been increasing enforcement, warning influencers to follow the rules and considering tougher measures if voluntary compliance does not improve (De Clercq, 2024).

The **Audiovisual Media Services Directive** (AVMSD) adds a second pillar specifically for video-sharing platforms (European Union, 2018). Platforms must have mechanisms for users to report or flag videos that could be harmful to minors. They are also obligated to ensure that advertising, product placement, or sponsorship in videos are easily identifiable and not harmful to minors – for instance, no inappropriate ads during children’s content. The AVMSD pushed platforms to implement parental control features and age verification for adult content. In essence, AVMSD brings traditional media’s youth protection standards into the realm of social media and streaming.

In summary, the DSA and GDPR establish broad obligations for safer design and data use, while the AVMSD and UCPD target content and advertising practices. The coming years will test the platforms’ compliance and regulators’ capacity to enforce it, with much depending on (national) implementation and enforcement. Using age assurance (the technical and procedural mechanisms for estimating a user’s age (range)) as an analytical lens, Galissaire (2025) shows that the persistent gap between the legal framework and minors’ actual protection is largely driven by shortcomings in implementation and enforcement.

Recent political momentum also underlines that the EU’s current framework may not yet suffice. In September 2025, 25 EU Member States led by Denmark and France adopted the so-called “Jutland Declaration”, calling on the European Commission to move beyond non-binding DSA guidance and establish a binding European framework for youth protection on social media. The declaration urges mandatory, privacy-preserving age-verification mechanisms, a possible minimum age for social-media use, and stricter prohibitions of manipulative or “addictive” design features such as endless scrolling and autoplay. Germany also signed the declaration, while only Belgium and Estonia abstained. The initiative signals growing cross-country pressure for a harmonized European approach, as Member States increasingly view national solutions – like France’s 2023 digital majority law or Denmark’s proposed ban on under-15-use – as legally fragile under EU primacy. The debate thus moves from guidance toward binding law, setting the stage for instruments like the upcoming Digital Fairness Act to close remaining enforcement gaps (Danish Presidency, 2025).

4.2 German legal framework and enforcement

Germany historically has strict youth protection laws and has updated them to address the digital environment in recent years. The **Youth Protection Act** (Jugendschutzgesetz, JuSchG) was overhauled in 2021 to extend its scope from traditional media to online platforms and apps (BMJV, 2021). The reform introduced the concept of developmentally impairing media and obligated online services like social networks and video

platforms to implement structural precautionary measures for the protection of minors. Major platforms must provide safe and effective default settings for users under the age of 18, aimed at shielding them from age-inappropriate content and interactions. For example, profiles of minors might have stricter privacy by default, or location sharing turned off. Providers are required to assess risks like cyberbullying, sexual solicitation, exposure to self-harm or extreme content, and even risks like excessive use or cost traps like in-app purchases and gambling elements. They must put in place measures to address these, including content filters, reporting systems, easy-to-use blocking tools, and usage tracking features. The law explicitly mentions protecting minors from interaction risks like contact from strangers, and usage risks like addiction and overspending. To enforce this, the reform created a new federal agency, the “Bundeszentrale für Kinder- und Jugendmedienschutz” (Federal Center for Child and Youth Media Protection, <https://www.bzjk.de>) which monitors compliance with these requirements. The German approach thus leans toward co-regulation: it sets outcomes like protecting children from cyberbullying and excessive use but gives companies some flexibility in how to achieve them under supervision.

The **State Media Treaty** (Medienstaatsvertrag, MStV) entails compliance of social media with advertising law and youth protection in online media (Die Medienanstalten, 2024). For example, influencers are subject to advertising disclosure rules under the treaty which means that if a post is commercial, it must be labeled as advertising.

The **State Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media** (Jugendmedienschutz-Staatsvertrag, JMStV) complements JuSchG and MStV by setting binding, state-level safeguards for both broadcasting and telemedia including social media and video-sharing services (Die Medienanstalten / Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz, 2024). It prohibits content that violates human dignity or criminal laws (e.g., glorification of violence, extremist propaganda, sexualized depictions of minors) and treats development-impairing content with protective measures rather than outright bans. For telemedia, providers are expected to deploy age-appropriate safeguards, notably age-assurance/verification, separation of adult content from child-directed areas, and machine-readable age labels that interoperate with recognized youth-protection software. Video-sharing services must take appropriate measures for minors’ safety, maintain user-complaint mechanisms, and support parental-control functions. Commercial providers that make potentially development-impairing content generally accessible must appoint a youth-protection officer or participate in a recognized self-regulatory body, within Germany’s model of co-regulation overseen by the Commission for Youth Media Protection (Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz, KJM). Enforcement includes information and cooperation duties for providers and administrative fines for violations. One can also submit complaints about problematic content on the internet (telemedia) or on private broadcasting services directly to the KJM. In practice, the JMStV functions as the core supervisory framework for youth protection in social media, working alongside EU-level obligations like DSA and GDPR.

Germany often goes **beyond legislation** with initiatives like Klicksafe, a program to educate youth on online safety. There are also hotlines and reporting centers like *jugendschutz.net* that monitor and flag harmful or illegal online content involving children. Overall, Germany’s legal framework emphasizes preventative design and accountability, aligning with its strong consumer protection culture.

4.3 Challenges and gaps in the current framework

Despite the progress in law, there remain some challenges regarding the protection of minors in social media. A persistent challenge is how to keep young people under the age of 13 or 16 off certain platforms or in

walled gardens without infringing privacy or discouraging all users. Strict age verification like ID upload can protect kids but raises data privacy issues. The EU’s exploration of an age verification solution – also discussed in the recent Jutland Declaration (Danish Presidency, 2025) – shows an attempt to solve this but widespread adoption is uncertain (European Commission, 2025). If age checks are too easy to circumvent, many children under the allowed age will continue to sign up. Policymakers must balance effective age gating with accessibility and privacy (cf. Brailovskaia et al., 2025). Perhaps the most apparent gap is that no law directly regulates platform design choices like infinite scroll or autoplay that can foster overuse.

The EU guidelines mention the avoidance of “addictive design”, but they are voluntary. Regulators are pressuring companies to self-regulate these elements, with the hint that if they do not, future laws could step in. Still, it is difficult to define what crosses the line. Overly strict rules could impair user experience and innovation.

Also, emerging risks are not covered by current laws. For example, AI-driven influencers and content could complicate transparency and manipulation issues further. Regulations like the DSA have broad provisions that could cover these since they force risk assessment for “any systemic risk”, but specific guidelines may lag tech developments. Many of the rules are also still ramping up enforcement. Platforms may not fully comply until fines or orders compel them. For example, Germany’s requirement for effective default protections is somewhat vague; some platforms might claim a bare minimum change as compliance. Close monitoring and possibly test cases will be needed to clarify standards. Beyond legal requirements, improving media literacy is crucial such that especially minors learn to critically evaluate online content. For example, not all young users are always able to identify ads by influencers even if they are labeled as such (like the law demands) or they trust influencers so much that disclosures do not mitigate the impact (Borchers, 2022). While Germany’s inclusion of digital literacy in some school curricula and the EU’s public awareness campaigns are attempts to fill this media literacy gap, it is an ongoing effort.

4.4 Recommendations and policy options

Anchored in a deontological duty to respect the dignity and developing autonomy of minors, and a utilitarian aim to maximize overall welfare while minimizing predictable harm, the following approach addresses the identified gaps in a proportionate and innovation-friendly way.

First of all, **age-appropriate design** should become the default. Platforms that are likely to be used by young people ought to provide a distinct “Young User Mode” for young people, tiered where appropriate by age band. This mode reduces friction that prolongs sessions, introducing intermissions for infinite scroll, switching autoplay off by default, offering night-time rest hours, clear, one-tap exits, and ban off push notifications (cf. Brailovskaia et al., 2025). At the same time, privacy should be strengthened through private profiles, disabling precise location, limiting inbound contact to known or mutually connected accounts, and making reporting and blocking tools highly salient. The content mix should be moderated through stronger filters against adult and self-harm material and by offering curated or chronological views that reduce compulsive loops. Compliance can be recognized through certification like a youth-safety seal, renewed periodically against outcome benchmarks so that safety becomes a maintained standard rather than a box-ticking exercise. Importantly, blanket prohibitions that exclude entire youth cohorts from mainstream social platforms are neither necessary nor proportionate. Such bans risk infringing the dignity and evolving autonomy of minors (deontological concern) and can lower aggregate welfare by deepening digital divides, displacing use to less safe channels, and encouraging privacy-intrusive enforcement (utilitarian concern). The point is

especially salient given Australia’s Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024, which requires platforms to take “reasonable steps” to prevent children and teenagers under the age of 16 from holding accounts from 10 December 2025 (Australian Government, 2024). The current EU debate illustrates this tension: While several governments advocate outright bans for certain age groups, the ethical and practical trade-offs rather point instead toward proportionate, design-based safeguards. According to the Danish Minister for Gender Equality and Digital Affairs, the countries should not commit to a specific age, as there are cultural differences between European countries (Moraht, 2025).

Second, **transparency and labeling** should be enhanced. More cues and information should be embedded into the user interface so that young users are nudged to think critically. These cues could include “This video is sponsored”, “This photo is filtered”, “This recommendation is trending, but not necessarily true”. Already existing cues like “Why am I seeing this ad?” could be made more user-friendly and educational for teens. These measures do not ban content, but they add information. This is an innovation-friendly approach that aligns with free expression and empowers the users. For example, Norway has introduced a statutory labeling requirement for retouched images and beauty filters on social media. Doh et al. (2024) view this as a step toward greater transparency but point to only limited effects on body image. France has gone further with a two-track model: Since 2023 social networks must obtain parental consent for users under 15 years (Blocman, 2023), and the dedicated “influencer law” requires clear labels for sponsored content as well as for retouched or AI-generated images, backed by significant penalties and platform co-responsibility (Légifrance, 2023).

Third, **transparency in the creator ecosystem** should move to a “truth-in-influence” standard. Posts that reach minors should carry a uniform, machine-readable dual disclosure: one label for material connections (paid, sponsored, affiliate) and one for provenance where significant retouching or AI-generated content is involved. Platforms should provide the tooling, enforce consistent labels, and maintain accessible ad libraries for teen-relevant content, with co-responsibility pathways for brands and agencies. This advances the duty of honesty while reducing misperceptions and impulsive responses. A registry for influencers could support compliance and law enforcement. An additional idea for a kind of certification system is an “influencer trust seal” which could further increase transparency and orientation for young users. For instance, the EU-funded pilot project “Influencers Trust Label (ITL)” which ran from 2020 to 2021 aimed to develop a framework to ensure the reliability and transparency of social media content, including guidelines, pilot testing, and cooperation with multiple stakeholders. In Germany, the discussion around such a “trust seal” for influencers is still at an early stage. So far, initiatives such as the German Advertising Council’s influencer training program and appropriate label dominate the debate, but a unified, widely recognized trust seal for influencers does not yet exist (Werberat, 2025).

Fourth, **advertising rules for minors** should be clarified for high-risk product categories such as alcohol, nicotine, gambling, and junk food. Campaigns should respect audience-composition thresholds and be blocked by default from children’s reach. Platforms can apply existing signal-based detection methods to identify such promotions, while shared liability for repeated breaches ensures that creators, agencies, and brands all bear responsibility. Narrow, risk-based limits of this kind can reduce harm without constraining legitimate commercial communication.

Finally, regulation alone is not a silver bullet. **Education** is key to long-term, innovation-friendly solutions. Germany should expand programs that teach children and adolescents about social media’s influences. This

means integrating modules on media literacy, critical thinking, and online well-being into school curricula as some federal states are already doing (Brailovskaia et al., 2025). It also involves public campaigns to reach parents and youth in the community. For example, a campaign could encourage families to adopt “phone-free bedtime” routines or teach teens how to report harmful content and use privacy settings. Empowering users through knowledge increases the positive impacts of other policies, as literate users are less likely to fall prey to scams, misinformation, or peer pressure online (ibid.). This approach is pro-innovation because it does not hinder platform features directly but equips the user base to use technology in healthier ways. This capstone is also ethically coherent since it empowers informed, autonomous agency (deontological) and amplifies the benefits of other measures while reducing residual harm (utilitarian).

By combining these measures, policymakers can realign the incentives and practices in the social media ecosystem: platforms and creators will remain free to innovate and create value, but within guardrails that ensure young users’ well-being is factored into the equation. The approach is “pro-innovation” because it does not aim to abolish or unduly restrict the core of social media services; rather, it seeks to guide the evolution of social media toward a more ethical, sustainable model. Much like food companies innovated healthier options when nutrition became a public concern, tech companies can innovate healthier engagement models for the youth.

5 Conclusion

The analysis shows that social media use is not just shaped by neutral technology but rather by commercial design choices in multi-sided markets that monetize attention and data. The dynamics that generate genuine benefits like social capital formation, informal learning, creative expression and low-cost entrepreneurship, also create risks for minors when engagement optimization exploits developmental vulnerabilities and blurs commercial intent. AI systems amplify both sides by sharpening relevance and safety filters while deepening rabbit holes and personalizing persuasion.

An integrated ethical approach clarifies how to govern these tensions. Deontological duties (see chapter 3.1) set red lines: children and adolescents must never be treated merely as means to clicks or sales. That rules out covert manipulation, dark patterns, and default settings that erode autonomy or privacy. Utilitarian reasoning (see chapter 3.2) then calibrates remedies to maximize net welfare: introduce friction where harms are largest, preserve features that create value, and focus enforcement on practices with poor benefit-risk profiles for minors.

Existing EU and German rules already point in this direction, but gaps remain in practice (see chapter 4.3), particularly around design patterns, effective age assurance with privacy safeguards, and consistent transparency in the creator economy. Our recommendations therefore prioritize: a default age-appropriate design (“Young User Mode”) that reduces compulsive loops and strengthens privacy and safety; a machine-readable dual disclosure standard for material influence and content provenance; targeted, risk-based limits for advertising categories that disproportionately harm minors; and scaled media-literacy initiatives for the affected adolescents, parents, and schools to sustain autonomy over time. These measures preserve innovation by steering competition toward healthier engagement models.

Practically, from an ethical perspective, the burden of action should track power and knowledge. Platforms and large creators possess the data and capability to change outcomes at scale and thus bear heightened

duties of care. Parents, schools, and young people remain essential partners in problem-solving but cannot substitute for structural safeguards. To narrow the compliance gap discussed in this study, regulators should pair outcome-based obligations with credible auditing, transparency, and co-responsibility across the ad supply chain.

The path forward should be neither total paternalistic prohibition nor laissez-faire. It is principled pragmatism: enforcing inviolable respect for dignity and autonomy while optimizing net welfare through proportionate, testable interventions. Incentives should be realigned in a way that platforms and creators keep innovating but with young people's well-being embedded as a design constraint rather than an afterthought. In the end, ensuring ethical standards in the digital environment of minors is not only a matter of individual protection but also of safeguarding long-term social and economic resilience. Well-calibrated rules and responsibilities can steer competition toward healthier engagement models and thereby strengthen trust in digital markets. Protecting young people's autonomy and dignity is thus more than a defensive task – it is a forward-looking investment in the skills, creativity and democratic capacity of the next generation.

German Summary – Zusammenfassung

Soziale Medien sind zu einer zentralen Infrastruktur von Jugendlichen geworden. Sie bieten ihnen Vorteile wie soziale Vernetzung, informelles Lernen, kreative Entfaltung und kostengünstige unternehmerische Möglichkeiten. Gleichzeitig können sie negative gesundheitliche Folgen haben und das Konsumverhalten auf intransparente Art und Weise beeinflussen. Durch die Kombination von Verhaltensethik und Digitalökonomie zeigt diese Studie, wie sich die Anreize von Social-Media-Plattformen und Influencern mit dem Wohlbefinden und der sich entwickelnden Autonomie junger Menschen in Einklang bringen lassen, ohne Innovationen zu verhindern.

Social-Media-Plattformen, Creator und Influencer nutzen häufig entwicklungsbedingte Vulnerabilitäten aus, was Marktversagen erzeugt und das Vertrauen in digitale Märkte untergräbt. Die ethische Bewertung in dieser Studie zeigt, dass der Schutz der Autonomie und Würde junger Menschen kategorische Pflichten erfordert (deontologische Perspektive) – etwa das Verbot von manipulativer Gestaltung und verdeckter Monetarisierung. Aus der utilitaristischen Perspektive sind verhältnismäßige, wohlfahrtsmaximierende Interventionen nötig. Die aktuellen rechtlichen Rahmenwerke in der EU und in Deutschland bieten zwar Orientierung, zeigen jedoch auch Lücken bei der Durchsetzung, insbesondere in Bezug auf Designmuster, Alterssicherung und Transparenz in der Creator Economy. Zu den wirksamen politischen Maßnahmen gehören standardmäßige „Young User Mode“-Einstellungen, die Offenlegung von Einfluss (Werbung) und Herkunft (Retusche/KI) von Inhalten, gezielte Beschränkungen für risikoreiche Werbung und umfangreiche Medienkompetenzprogramme. Zusammengefasst können diese Maßnahmen Anreize für innovationskompatible, gesündere Engagement-Modelle geben, das Wohlergehen junger Menschen als Designrestriktion etablieren und das Vertrauen in digitale Märkte stärken.

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