



Social media platforms  
as business driven by  
addictiveness.

Is there a role for competition  
law?



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# Key Problem

Can competition law help in addressing risks addictive social-media produce for fundamental rights (health) and democracy (pluralistic public debate)?

## Debate: scope and pro-democratic role of competition law

Competition law does more than just upholding competition on the merits; indeed consumer interests harmed by anticompetitive practices are not only consistent with competition on the merits but are "also necessary in order to ensure plurality in a democratic society" (*General Court, Google Android, 2022: para 1028*).

# Addictiveness and the consequences

Social media platforms use addictive design features that keep users online for prolonged periods.

Excessive use negatively affects users' mental and physical health.

Algorithm-driven content feeds often promote sensational, extreme, or misleading information.

Exposure to such content increases risks of user radicalization.

This radicalization contributes to societal polarization.

Polarization undermines pluralistic public debate, which is essential for a healthy democratic society.

# Role for competition law - aspects

1. Definition of relevant market
2. Exclusionary theories of harm linked to addictiveness
3. Exploitative theories of harm linked to addictiveness

# Relevant market

## **User-Side (Age Segmentation)**

- Platform usage differs strongly by age; substitutability varies across generations.
- Network effects and platform stickiness reinforce these differences.

## **Two-Sided Market Structure**

- Market definition must include both advertising and user-facing functionalities.
- Platforms may be similar in monetization but play different roles for users.
- Data gathered on users influences other products/services and should be factored into the analysis.

# Exclusion

Addictive design acts as a lock-in tool, helping dominant platforms retain users and hinder entry.

Long-standing platforms hold extensive user data, enabling algorithmic personalisation that further reinforces user lock-in.

→ Incumbents may intentionally increase addictiveness to block or weaken new, non-addictive competitors.

Illustration: The 2022 Meta shift toward TikTok-like content shows a “race to the bottom”, where platforms are pushed to increase addictiveness to keep market share.

Result: No non-addictive alternatives emerge?

# Exploitation

1. Quality degradation can occur when addictive features are imposed, reducing user well-being

Addictive design negatively affects user health, constituting a decline in service quality.

2. Unfair terms and conditions may arise when platforms impose one-sided rules users wouldn't accept under real competition.

Lack of transparency about addictive features can be viewed as exploitative, undermining informed user consent.

# Enforcement

Enforcement could incorporate multidisciplinary insights to better understand digital platform dynamics.

Soft law development could integrate broader factors such as personalisation and its role in user lock-in.

Enforcement could include diverse stakeholders, not only industry voices—e.g., consumer groups and NGOs.

Broader participation helps address risks at stake.

# Thank you!

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