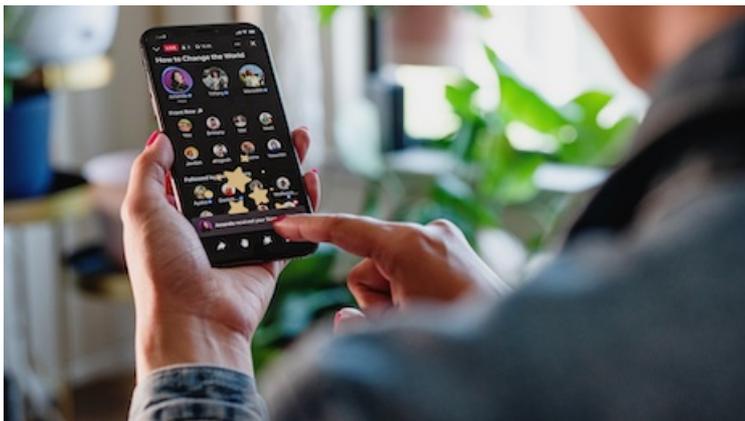


SOFTWARE AND TECHNOLOGY

Government criticism unlikely to dissuade brands from leveraging social media marketing

October 29, 2021



Facebook and Instagram are invaluable to marketers. Image credit: Meta

By KATIE TAMOLA

While the U.S. government is taking a more proactive role in technology and social media regulation, it is doubtful marketers will reduce their reliance on these platforms to engage with consumers.

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On Oct. 26, a U.S. Senate committee questioned representatives from popular social media platforms Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube about how usage of their platforms has led to harmful behavior including bullying and illegal activity. This is the latest development in a series of events that have called the ethics of social media into question on a national stage, causing consumers dismay but not drastically eroding brands' presences on social media or application usage.

"Social media is proving to be an invaluable tool for brand advertising," said Rania Sedhom, founder and managing partner of **Sedhom Law Group**, New York.

A harsh social world

Tech giants are experiencing somewhat of an awakening as of late, as whistleblowers, government officials, concerned parents and more are increasingly out against the ways social media can be harmful.

Earlier this month, whistleblower and former Facebook employee Frances Haugen testified before Congress that the company repeatedly prioritized profits over the safety of its users.



Social ads, especially those on Instagram and TikTok, continue to reach younger consumers. Image credit: Shutterstock

Ms. Haugen **alleges** that Facebook's leadership shifted its focus to continuing the giant's growth, removing resources from safety programs, and even encouraged political divisions and violence.

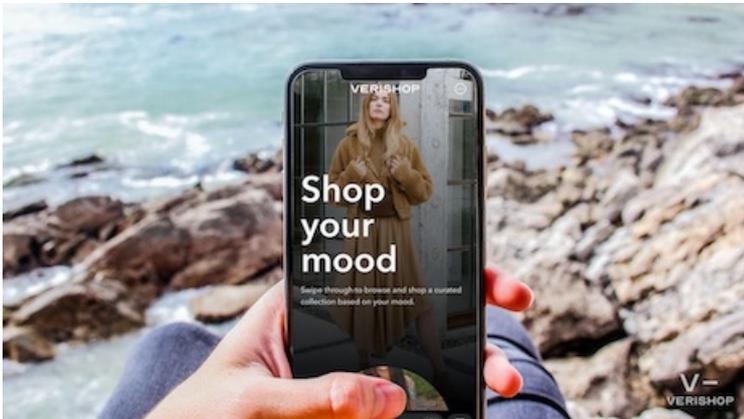
According to *The Washington Post*, a new whistleblower affidavit submitted by another former Facebook employee on Oct. 22 also alleged that the company prioritized growth and profits over combating hate speech.

In early October, Instagram a subsidiary of the company previously known as Facebook, which rebranded to Meta on Oct. 28 (**see story**) **announced** that it was pausing development of a version of its app designed for children 13 years old or younger because of safety and privacy concerns.

News of the pause came after *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the company conducted internal research and actually knew that Instagram was having negative mental health effects on teenage girls.

Facebook and Instagram are not the only platforms being asked to face the music.

On Oct. 26, representatives from Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube appeared before the Senate Commerce subcommittee on consumer protection, product safety and data security the same panel that called on Facebook alumna Ms. Haugen to testify.



More high-end brands have been partnering with Snapchat. Image credit: Verishop

TikTok's vice president and head of public policy Michael Beckerman; Snap Inc.'s vice president of global public policy Jennifer Stout and YouTube's vice president of government affairs and public policy Leslie Miller each defended their respective organizations.

Ms. Stout responded to claims that Snapchat has contributed to car accidents with its "speed filter," and was used as a communication tool for illicit drug exchanges. She expressed that Snapchat was "absolutely determined" to remove drug dealers from the space.

YouTube's Ms. Miller responded to the claim that these platforms have been used to expose young users to content related to sex, self-harm or material that encourages body-image issues.

She noted that YouTube prohibits content that glorifies eating disorders but that some users do use the platform to share their genuine experiences, and that 90 percent of the content on the platform that violates community guidelines is detected through artificial intelligence.

Although the platforms are facing criticism, many experts do not anticipate brands halting their advertising on these

spaces.

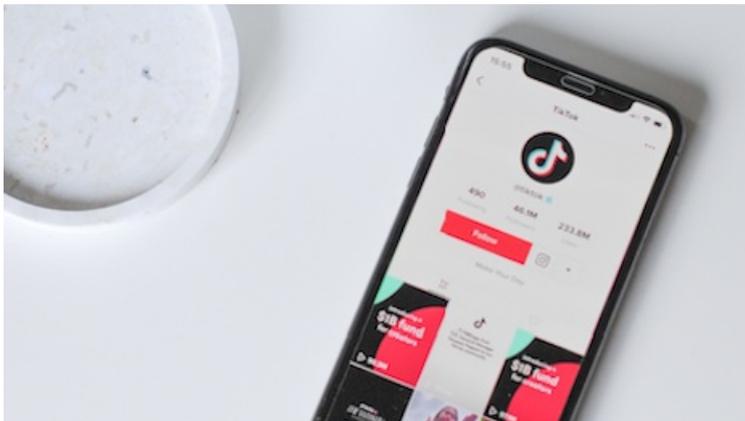
"I think brands will continue to advertise on these platforms as long as the audience is there," said Lyndsay Hoff, senior growth manager at [Summer Friday](#), San Francisco.

"They may tweak their message to be more self aware as the conversation continues to grow and catch fire with Gen Z," she said. "I think for now they see the power of the apps to connect on societal and ethical issues, and value that more than the problems the apps create.

"The good outweighs the bad."

Sen. Ted Cruz questioned TikTok's Mr. Beckerman about whether U.S. user data is shared with its parent company, Beijing-based ByteDance. TikTok has denied these claims repeatedly perpetuated during the Trump administration several times, and did so again at hearing.

In September, Sen. Ed Markey and Sen. Richard Blumenthal also introduced the KIDS (Kids Internet Design and Safety) Act which would limit young users' access to engagement-boosting features, as well as ban influencer marketing to children younger than 16 years of age.



TikTok has been the target of government and watchdog scrutiny. Image credit: Unsplash

While social media sites are valuable discovery and marketing platforms, brands have also previously been critical. In summer 2020, more than 1,000 brands including Adidas, Diageo, Ford, InterContinental Hotels Group, Royal Bank of Canada, The North Face and Volkswagen temporarily stopped paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram because of issues with misinformation and hate speech.

"Despite the public scandals surrounding Facebook and Instagram right now, advertising spend on these platforms won't go away anytime soon because most small- and medium-sized ecommerce businesses still rely on this channel for a majority of their revenue," said Daniel Panelo, founder of [Marpipe](#), New York.

Social media as a marketing necessity

Although the detrimental effects social media can have on consumers and society continues to come to light, not many people expect brands, retailers and users to stop using the platforms.

With a reach of billions of users, these platforms are essential for marketers looking to build brand awareness, increase ecommerce sales and more.

"Although there are several issues that need to be addressed with a variety of platforms, those unresolved issues will likely not cause brands to abandon utilizing social media to promote themselves and effectuate sales," Ms. Sedhom said. "What is more likely to happen is that the brands will assess the deleterious effects of each platform and react to their findings.

"Some brands may warn consumers of the harmful effects of overusing a platform or may curtail its use of certain platforms altogether or at certain times of day," she said.

According to Criteo's 2019 "Why We Buy" survey, Facebook was the top digital channel for shoppers to discover new brands. While almost half of consumers found new brands through Facebook, 40 percent and 27 percent of respondents said they discovered new brands through YouTube and Instagram, respectively ([see story](#)).

Social media has also transformed into the ultimate shopping destination, and brands are taking note.

During the Financial Times "Future of Retail" virtual conference in September, industry experts discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic and the innate tech-savviness of younger generations have shaped new ecommerce capabilities among social platforms. As consumers continue to turn to social commerce, brands cannot neglect the opportunity to augment their social presences and capitalize on these apparently permanent digital buying habits ([see story](#)).

"Gen Z, being the social generation, is fully aware of the risks behind social but they're not going to abandon social media because it has already ingrained itself as our place for discourse and commerce," said Marpipe's Mr. Panelo. "The ironic part about the Facebook hearings is that they've generated all these trending hashtags and major conversations that are taking place on their own social platforms, boosting their own usage numbers."

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