Social Media Addiction and the Loneliness Epidemic

Melanie Huynh
Old Dominion University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/ourj

Part of the Education Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION AND THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

By Melanie Huynh

The rise of social media platforms continues to produce a generation of young individuals entirely dependent on and entranced by the ability to curate virtual realities at their fingertips - an addiction so powerful that it is often compared to that of cocaine (Kotler, 2017). Since the launch of Myspace in 2004, it became renowned as "the first social media site to reach a million monthly active users" and the avenues by which people communicated and consumed information completely transformed. Out of the estimated 7.7 billion population, "at least 3.5 billion [individuals are actively] online" (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The underlying problem does not originate from the user; rather, websites and applications, such as Facebook and Instagram, are strategically and purposefully designing their mediums to be addictive.

In one psychological study performed by Stanford University professor, Robert Sapolsky, he trained a monkey to understand that pulling on a lever ten times will produce food after a small delay. The monkey was notified of a new session each time a signal was turned on. Contrary to Sapolsky's initial hypothesis that levels of dopamine would increase after work expenditure (i.e pulling the lever), dopamine levels actually spiked in response to the signal being turned on. "Dopamine is not about pleasure; it's about the anticipation of pleasure. It's about the pursuit of happiness, rather than about happiness itself," notes Sapolsky. Furthering this investigation, Sapolsky reduced the percentage of rewards offered for the monkey's work from 100% to 50% of the time. The results showed that dopamine reached an all-time high when the predictability of results was lowered (FORA.tv, 2011). By introducing a level of uncertainty or randomness, also referred to as the "Magic of Maybe" (Kotler, 2017), uncertainty now

becomes the reward and ultimately triggers and fuels addictive behaviors ("'Maybe' is addictive," 2016). Not only has this highly calculated technique contributed to the success of casinos, engineering technologists have found ways to maintain and prolong user engagement and attention to maximize profit. Tristan Harris, widely recognized in "The Social Dilemma" Netflix documentary and the co-founder and president of the Center for Humane Technology (Harris, 2021), reveals that attention engineers working for these social networking sites have obtained a comprehensive understanding of when a user is most likely to be in a vulnerable state in order to encourage frequent re-visits to the site. In the event a user uploads a new photo, for example, "that's a moment where our mind is very vulnerable to knowing what other people think." The technology companies will then deliberately "control the dial for when and how long your profile photo shows up on other people's news feeds [and can arrange "likes" to be distributed] over a delayed period of time." As a result, it encourages the user to return to the site to check for new notifications (Absolute Motivation, 2018).

Beyond the addictive nature of social media, excessive consumption and use has been shown to severely impact mental health - especially in teens (McLean Hospital, 2021). When users post to these platforms, it is highly unlikely for them to share the negative aspects of their lives. They are carefully choosing, editing, and uploading the best photos that showcase their ideal, and often positive self. Consequently, the platform becomes overly saturated with everyone's prime moments that may cause users to falsely believe that their lives are not as fulfilling as others. It is easily and often forgotten that each user shares a common goal in hiding their worst selves; nevertheless, "[t]he reason we struggle with insecurity is because we compare our behind-the-scenes with everyone else's highlight reel," says pastor Steven Furtick of

Elevation Church (Holland, 2019). The negative outcomes of social media on one's cognitive thinking has therefore fueled the ever-growing loneliness epidemic.

Dating back to 1985, a national survey was conducted in America to find out how many people a typical person had to confine important matters to. "The respondents reported an average of 2.94 friends and family members...but when...asked the same question in a survey two decades later, the number had dropped to 2.08." Since then, "[l]oneliness has been a concern [for] humanistic psychologists" (Burger, 2017, p.288-289). The terms "loneliness" and "isolation" are often used interchangeably; however, loneliness should not be confused or equated with the term isolation. Isolation is a physical state and refers to an individual engaging in "little or no contact with other people," whereas loneliness is a state of emotion (GoodTherapy, 2019) and "occurs when a person's network of social relationships is smaller or less satisfying *than the person desires*" (Burger, 2017, p.288-289). In relation to social media, various research studies have concluded that although these platforms can be a great mode of communication with friends and to build connections within one's niche, using social media as a "substitute for real connection [may cause one's] feelings of loneliness and inadequacy [to] likely worsen" (Amatenstein, 2019). This general statement, however, only illustrates the correlation between social media and loneliness. Brian Primack, director of the Center for Research on Media, Technology, and Health at the University of Pittsburgh, and his colleagues' study on "social media use and depression in young adults" found that "when people feel socially isolated, they go online a lot in an attempt to feel less lonely. Or it might be that spending a lot of time on social media makes people feel isolated." This idea is commonly known as FOMO, or the Fear Of Missing Out. Society has become heavily dependent on these platforms to stay connected that, in turn, makes solitude difficult to bear for some. When a user is not online, it

creates an anxiety that they are missing out on what those online may be receiving or experiencing. This prompts the user to continuously check their social media and fragment their attention span throughout the day. Additionally, the user is able to see all of the interactions going on between other users and this can make them feel as though they are being "excluded" – creating or enhancing the feelings of loneliness (Hobson, 2017).

Out of the entire population, children and young adolescents are the most vulnerable groups targeted by social media companies. Social media does not have any strict laws or regulations, as with alcohol, that prevents a young individual from gaining access to the product - in this case, opening an account. Journalist Steven Kotler describes this as "putting highly addictive drugs into the hands of kids before they have any natural defenses against them" (Kotler, 2017). It can be a great learning tool for them to understand the issues that are occurring in their world, but it can also be a dangerous place for them to develop habits or behaviors that may not be appropriate. Adolescence and childhood are the most pivotal moments where the child learns to develop social skills (e.g. making in-person connections, understanding others' feelings, proper manners). If social media replaces this, it may be difficult for children to communicate and interact with their peers in the real world in the future. A majority of schools only focus on abstinence from phone use, but they are not teaching students about the harm social media can have on their productivity and their mental health. If this is emphasized, many students can learn to use social media wisely without being overly consumed. This may even help decrease the rates of depression among young adults and children.

In conclusion, the rise of social media has reached a massive audience and brought upon a new form of addiction. The chase for dopamine through push notifications and validation in the form of "likes" has hooked more than 3 billion people - with most developing FOMO. This

anxiety of missing out is correlated with the loneliness epidemic among individuals. Access to social media by the younger generation has become increasingly easier, less restrictive, and more saturated than ever before, and it is suspected to impact their development. Awareness needs to be spread regarding the implications of social media on mental health to help users build a meaningful, positive relationship with such platforms.

REFERENCES

Absolute Motivation. (2018, April 20). *You Will Wish You Watched This Before You Started Using Social Media | The Twisted Truth* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmEDAzqswh8

Amatenstein, S. (2019, November 15). Not So Social Media: How Social Media Increases Loneliness - PsyCom. Retrieved November 15, 2019, from https://www.psycom.net/how-social-media-increases-loneliness/.

Burger, J. M. (2017). *Personality*. (10th Ed). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning

FORA.tv. (2011, March 2). *Dopamine Jackpot! Sapolsky on the Science of Pleasure* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axrywDP9Ii0

Good Therapy. (2019, March 12). Isolation and Loneliness: What's the Difference? Retrieved May 1, 2021, from https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/isolation-loneliness-whats-the-difference0312197#:~:text=Some%20people%20use%20the%20words,such%20as%20anxiety%20or%20depression.

Harris, T. (2021). About Tristan Harris. Retrieved April 14, 2021, from https://www.tristanharris.com/

Hobson, K. (2017, March 6). Feeling Lonely? Too Much Time On Social Media May Be Why. Retrieved November 24, 2019, from https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/03/06/518362255/feeling-lonely-too-much-time-on-social-media-may-be-why.

Holland, E. (2019, February 26). Why We Compare Ourselves on Social Media and How to Stop. Retrieved November 16, 2019, from https://tinybuddha.com/blog/why-compare-others-social-media-how-to-stop/.

Kotler, S. (2017, February 17). How We Chase Dopamine: Porn, Social Media, and Alcohol. Retrieved November 16, 2019, from https://bigthink.com/videos/steven-kotler-on-addictions-and-dopamine.

"'Maybe' is addictive like nothing else out there". (2016, January 6). Retrieved November 16, 2019, from http://jnack.com/blog/2016/01/06/maybe-is-addictive-like-nothing-else-out-there/.

McLean Hospital. (2021, February 9). The Social Dilemma: Social Media and Your Mental Health. Retrieved April 14, 2021, from https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/it-or-not-social-medias-affecting-your-mental-health.

Ortiz-Ospina, E. (2019, September 18). The rise of social media. Retrieved November 21, 2019, from https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media.