Internet Illusions

Social media's psychological downside

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When self-described serial entrepreneur Andrew Weinreich launched the social network website SixDegrees.com in the spring of 1996 (predating Facebook), he couldn't possibly have foreseen social media's impact on human culture, language and psychology. Now, more than 20 years later, social media generates friendships between total strangers, allows people to experience liking as both an emotional and technological function, and prompts folks to measure their success in life according to how many followers they accumulate. But in choosing to sail this particular sea, do we run the risk of hitting a reef?

A growing number of mental health experts say yes.

"Every new communication technology has brought with it significant challenges as well as opportunities," says Melissa G. Hunt, PhD, the associate director of clinical training at the University of Pennsylvania's department of psychology. "On balance, I'm concerned that social media is having a negative impact on our culture, and we must think long and hard about how we want to manage it moving forward."

Hunt has been studying the effects of social media use on the mental health of young adults for some time now. In September 2017, she and two colleagues, undertook what they assert is "the first ecologically valid experimental investigation to examine multiple social media platforms and track actual usage objectively."

For the study, Hunt and her team recruited 143 undergraduates and randomly assigned them either to limit their use of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram to 30 minutes each day or to use these apps as usual for the duration of the academic year. (The researchers verified that individuals observed the 30-minute limit via screenshots of the iPhone feature Screen Time, which tracks how much time users spend on individual apps.)

Published in November 2018 in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, the results were sobering: Unrestricted use of social media correlated with higher self-reported levels of anxiety and loneliness.

Hunt, for one, was unsurprised.

“We’ve always known that looking at women’s magazines has a negative effect on women’s self-esteem,” she says. “Instagram and Snapchat filters just exacerbate that in real time.”

Richard Perloff, a professor of communication, psychology and political science at Cleveland State University, draws a similar parallel. “Social media has mental health effects in the same way as, generations ago, advertisements or television shows like Charlie’s Angels had effects,” he says. “I don’t want to say social media is more powerful than television—that is an unanswerable question.”

But, he adds, “it does have a unique kind of power given its algorithmic design, given its visuals, given the fact that you can add to social media in certain ways, given the fact that you get instant feedback.”

Caveat lector: Not everyone responds to social media in the same way. In a 2014 paper on the subject of young women’s body image, Perloff proposed a model of social media influence mediated by external factors, such as familial relationships, as well as personal traits, such as perfectionism.

“If my mom has really been somebody who harps on her body, who’s got some body issues, and then I go on social media,” he said by way of example, “I may be susceptible to voices in my head…that can cede into a kind of pathology. So a lot of it depends on where you start out.”

At her office in Arlington, Virginia, Jelena Kecmanovic, PhD, a cognitive behavior therapist, sees people on the more susceptible end of that spectrum. A native of the Balkans who is fluent in three languages, Kecmanovic specializes in helping people unlearn bad habits or thought patterns they’ve picked up through the years. Toxic social media use is a common culprit.

“I would say probably at least half of my sessions, probably more than half—actually 60% to 70% of them—include some kind of discussion of something that happened on social media and how someone felt [in response],” she says.

For example, one of her clients, a woman in her mid-30s with two small children, felt indirectly mom shamed by the Facebook posts of a real-life friend.

“This friend is an ‘older mother’ who puts everything out there—how she’s an ‘earth mother’ and how she’s mothering and everything’s natural and homemade and perfect and so forth,” Kecmanovic says. “And every time my client would go and log on to Facebook and see this woman’s posts, she would feel horrible. She would feel her shortcomings.”

But despite being, as Perloff notes, “more vulnerable” to the negative feedback that a social media presence can invite, women are by no means the only ones affected. A male client of Kecmanovic’s who is single was using Instagram in a way that made him feel undesirable.

“He says, ‘I’m scrolling through my Instagram feed, and there’ll be posts from all these gorgeous girls [from my high school] on vacation, like ‘Life is glorious,’” explains Kecmanovic. “And he says

it’s almost like adding salt to a wound, to an injury, like ‘They’re all living these fabulous lives, and look at me, here by myself. Who would even look at me?’”

What’s more, this problem has been found to persist even when people are aware, or told, that what they see on social media is artificial, staged or fake—in Hunt’s words, nothing more than a “carefully curated highlights reel.”

Kecmanovic believes that the neurological appeal of images on social media can wield tremendous power. “In psychology, we know that images are much more appealing to emotions; that’s why Instagram can be particularly [harmful to mental health],” she observes. “People know rationally that social media posts aren’t representative of real lives, that they’re just part of an image their friends and acquaintances are trying to portray and project, but emotionally, they can’t help feel bad about themselves and their bodies.”

But not all social media platforms are image-reliant; many, like Twitter, are primarily text-based. So why do those hold just as much sway over our emotions?

“There are many reasons,” Kecmanovic says, “but upward social comparison is one of the main ones.”

Social comparison is the theory that people are neurologically primed to evaluate themselves in relation to their peers. Part of the issue with social media, then, is that, in showcasing all the great moments in people’s lives (the vacations, the parties, the promotions) and none of the lows (the breakups, the fights, the failures), the platform sets the bar for success unrealistically high.

“Nobody’s going to post a bad picture of themselves—they want to look digitally good,” Kecmanovic says. “So the average person starts scrolling through their feed, and everybody looks gorgeous; everybody’s thin and tan and enjoying the beach, but that’s not real life.”

But social media isn’t all bad. These online spaces provide a platform for minority voices, foster the growth of supportive communities and, in some cases, even provide users with the sort of interpersonal connections they lack in real life, suggest the experts.

“Social media can be funny, and it can be great,” Perloff says. “But it can also be problematic if you’re in the wrong place at the wrong psychological time.”

Perhaps that is the fairest, most realistic evaluation of this form of electronic communication that’s become so much a part of our lives.

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