

THE WORLD RUNS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: DESPITE FREQUENT WARNINGS, SOCIAL MEDIA MOVE TO THE CENTER OF SOCIETAL ACTIVITIES!



CONTEXT & DYNAMICS

Every year, another study finds another reason why social media are bad for one's health. And every year, more and more people sign up and spend more time participating on a social media platform. Are people crazy? Or is there something missing in this picture? One way to start answering these questions is to look at various ways social media are being used for positive outcomes. In real estate, politics, work, jobs, business and communities, social media are providing effective ways to operate. But are transactions and interactions so positive that they overcome the medical findings? Why are social media so popular? Psychologically, humans are social, and social media provide a simulacrum of socializing. More critically, they provide affirmations for individuals and offer a stimulus for the brain to secrete a feel-good neurotransmitter. Humans just cannot stop.

IMPLICATIONS

- *Social media will continue to work their way to the center of human activity.*
- *New kinds of social media will constantly surface and push aside earlier versions.*
- *New applications of social media will be found and will help more and more new enterprises to succeed, which will be good for digital payment systems.*
- *Working as content creators will attract more and more people, siphoning off creative people from the traditional workforce.*
- *Content creators are the new celebrities.*
- *Companies will continue to increase social media marketing budgets.*
- *Barriers to entry have collapsed in many industries, with individuals and companies able to launch new enterprises via social media with very little upfront cost.*
- *Companies that do not align with their customers' social media practices might find themselves losing market share or filing for bankruptcy.*
- *Social media will help steer more users toward the virtual world.*
- *Governments will face increased pressure to deal with more and more complaints about the personal risks and damage of social media.*



Who Cares About the Downsides?

“Yet another high-quality study suggests you’d be happier if you quit social media.” That is the title of a recent article in *Inc.* magazine. The cited study, published in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, divided participants into two groups, one foregoing social media for a week and the other using online media the way they usually do. After just one week, those laying off the digital media stuff fared much better on the three basic metrics used: “well-being, depression and anxiety.” (*Inc.*, 5/23/22)

As the article’s title suggested, this was not the first study to conclude definitively that social media have negative effects on humans and their brains. The Mayo Clinic reported that studies in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020 verified that social media have deleterious effects on the human psyche, especially on teens. Which leads to this fact:

The Mayo Clinic reported that studies in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020 verified that social media have deleterious effects on the human psyche, especially on teens.

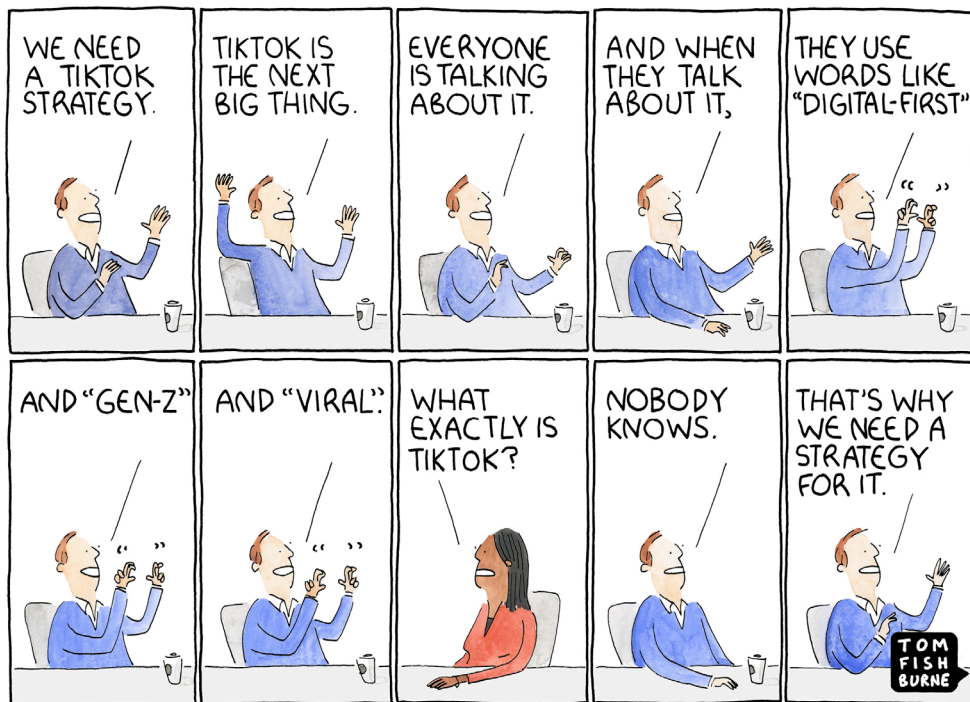
As we have written in the past, such capabilities as “likes” and “thumbs up” or even reposting tend to trigger squirts of dopamine – a feel-good neurotransmitter – in the brain. In this way, continued use of social media and the feedback loops they generate have a passing relation to addiction of drugs and other substances (see [inThought 9/7/21](#))

Still, for every second that passes, another eleven people somewhere in the world try social media for the first time. Marketers have jumped on the bandwagon, spending, for instance, \$26.46 billion on advertising on Instagram alone, believing, evidently, that social media are transaction media. Whatever advertisers wish to do, they must use the mainstays of social media: interactivity, entertainment and humor – that is, content. (*Omnicores*, 2/27/22)

So what makes social media so appealing? Why do people look for advice from people they have never met? How have they held such a grip on people’s attention for so long? We will start with a look at how social media are being used.

◆ The average U.S. Android user spends 29 hours a month on TikTok, 16 hours on Facebook, eight hours on Instagram and six hours on Snap. When Twitter, on which users post more than 500 million tweets every day, and all the other social media are added together, the average American spends more than 63 hours each month staring at a screen searching for information, entertainment and social interaction. (*Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, 6/27/22; *Statista*, 6/21/22)

Social media have negative mental health effects – and everyone wants more. So goes a huge anomaly in American behavior and its consequences.



How Are They Used?

The term “social media” evokes imagery of teenagers exchanging messages, posting another video, uploading a new bitmoji, sharing the latest brand of this or that, watching a “hot” influencer or listening to whatever is trending at the moment. But social media continue to penetrate deeper into the economy than such facile imagery might suggest. Social media have become critical contributors to the economy as well as to users’ daily routines. Consider the following:

Real Estate – Finding a home has made a move to social media. A Fort Worth real estate agent started a TikTok site in January 2021 and quickly amassed 2.2 million “likes” on his videos. Unlike the print media he previously used, his TikTok videos were nearly free. TikTok’s #HomesForSale hashtag received 24.4 million views through the end of last year, and its #LuxuryRealEstate had 556 million views. One New York City agent said that 100 percent of her business comes from TikTok, and because of that connection, her total commissions doubled last year. A Dallas realtor said he gets 75 percent of his leads from TikTok, and his sales have quadrupled since he added social media to his business. (*CNN*, 12/10/21)

Political Positioning – Social media have become a standard part of political discourse. Activists across the political spectrum use social media to organize events and stay connected. This became the default organizing practice with the Arab Spring protests, which used Twitter and YouTube to organize public demonstrations, and that led to social media being the communications tool in everything from Black Lives Matter protests to rallies for and against abortion. Russians exploited Facebook and other social media to launch their disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. More recently, China’s influence campaigns used more than 500 Facebook accounts, collecting 70,000 followers, to spread its own propaganda inside the U.S. (*Washington Post*, 6/28/22)

Work – The pandemic has shifted people’s attitudes about work, and they are sharing their new perspectives on social media. The hashtag #QuitTok is for those who have quit demoralizing jobs to celebrate their “freedom” and to receive affirmations from others. One

A Dallas realtor said he gets 75 percent of his leads from TikTok, and his sales have quadrupled since he added social media to his business.

TikTok hashtag shares tips on how to negotiate salaries during interviews, spot red flags in new employers and understand workplace nonnegotiables. Meanwhile, #CareerTok is a TikTok hashtag for people looking for jobs and for employers looking to hire, and so far, it has had 70 million views. (*Vox*, 4/22/22; *BBC*, 11/2/21)

Jobs – “Content creator” is a term that sprang from digital communications. While humans through the ages have been content creators, the term as used online refers to users who write, livestream and upload a video, an image or other content that is viewed by fellow users online. Content creators might dance, pantomime, do backflips or perform a humorous or unusual trick, all to attract a favorable response from those who caught the “act.” With enough followers, the uploaded content connects creators to advertisers, and a new job is created. In the case of content creators called influencers – social media celebrities who display and use products – producing videos and

garnering a sizable following can lead to a new source of revenue. With 500,000 U.S. influencers functioning on Instagram alone, the concept of an individual demonstrating and talking about things online, whether topics of interest or products of allure, has become a social media phenomenon and a new job category. From there, influencers can move into other jobs, as did Molly-Mae Hague, an Instagram influencer, who last year became creative director of British fashion brand PrettyLittleThing, or Emma Chamberlain, another influencer, who was appointed creative director of skin-care brand Bad Habit. In the past, securing such an elevated position required formal training. (*Glossy*, 5/2/22; *Omnicores*, 2/27/22)



Business – Marketing and advertising have certainly moved into the social media space, if for no other reason than “that’s where consumers are.” But business use has gone beyond the ad and marketing realms. TikTok partnered with Virtual Dining Concepts to launch 300 TikTok Kitchen facilities, with plans to have 1,000 operating by year’s end. The Kitchens will focus on viral food trends – that is, “trending” recipes from online – and will use those recipes and share profits with the recipes’ creators. Meanwhile, Barnes & Noble and several book publishers claim that #BookTok, the social medium’s book-reviewing hashtag, has sparked sales of the books it has cited. Beauty brands have turned to influencers to launch new brands via social media, with, for instance, Coty focusing on Gen Z consumers via TikTok. New brands that launch on social media gain access to a large market almost immediately, with, for example, #EuphoriaMakeUp, for the brand Half Magic, attracting more than 2.1 billion views in the months following its launch. (*Tech Radar*, 2/19/22; *New York Times*, 4/15/22; *Financial Times*, 6/22/22)

Communities – Social media provide ways for groups to form communities of common perspectives or needs; they provide chat rooms for individuals to gather and discuss topics of their choosing; and they allow organization to meet and discuss whatever is important to them. Schools, neighborhoods, libraries and other institutions use social media to bring members closer together. While that has had a positive outcome, such potential community development recently caught the eye of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Agents reported that white supremacists were using social media platforms to agitate and anger members, as well as attract new members by raising challenging perspectives on abortion, guns, immigration and LGBTQ rights. (*Associated Press*, 6/12/22)

Social media have become the go-to networks for individuals and groups to exchange information, entertain one another and share content of all kinds. Because of the wider applications of social media to individuals, companies wanting to connect with social media patrons will need to align with their social media

New brands that launch on social media gain access to a large market almost immediately, with, for example, #EuphoriaMakeUp, for the brand Half Magic, attracting more than 2.1 billion views in the months following its launch.

practices as well as the entire range of the digitally trained individual. While practices exhibited by users suggest the appeal of social media, another question lingers: **Why** are social media so appealing?



So Why Social Media?

Humans are social creatures, and social media provide everyone an opportunity to socialize with fellow humans. Yet why have humans turned to non-physical socialization? As mentioned, businesses find social media valuable because that is where so many potential customers hang out – that, and the fact that people on social media self-organize and that data are easily grabbed, making targeting ads easier to execute and social media much cheaper than television for ads and less expensive than physical retail for selling. That explains why businesses and organizations look favorably on social media. But that all leads to a more specific question: Why do individuals hang out there? Five years

ago, a Nieman Lab at Harvard University survey revealed that only 24 percent of respondents thought social media did a good job of helping them discern fact from fiction. So social media do not appeal for their fact-checking. (NiemanLab, 11/30/17)

Before explaining the risks of attachment to social media, the Mayo Clinic acknowledged that online connections offer teens and others valuable personal support, entertainment, humor, distraction, communication across great distances and opportunities for self-expression. After listing the positive attributes of social media, however, the Clinic webpage went on to list the many medical studies that proved how bad social media are for teens and others. (Mayo Clinic, 2/26/22)

Carl Rogers (d. 1987) established the field of humanistic psychology and served as president of the American Psychological Association. His approach started with the premise that individuals have two kinds of self: the real self and the ideal self. The real self is the actual person existing and experiencing the world, while the ideal self is what that person wants to be. A productive person has a connection between the two and has high self-worth, while a person lacking a connection between the two selves has low self-esteem and has trouble becoming productive. (e-learningnetwork, 1/1/21; Shutterstock, 4/20/21)

Sharing content on social media becomes an expression of one's identity, but not the real identity – rather, the ideal one.

The digital world, and specifically social media, provide an outlet for the differences between the real and the ideal, offering an individual a place to send the ideal self out for others to see and, it is hoped, approve of.

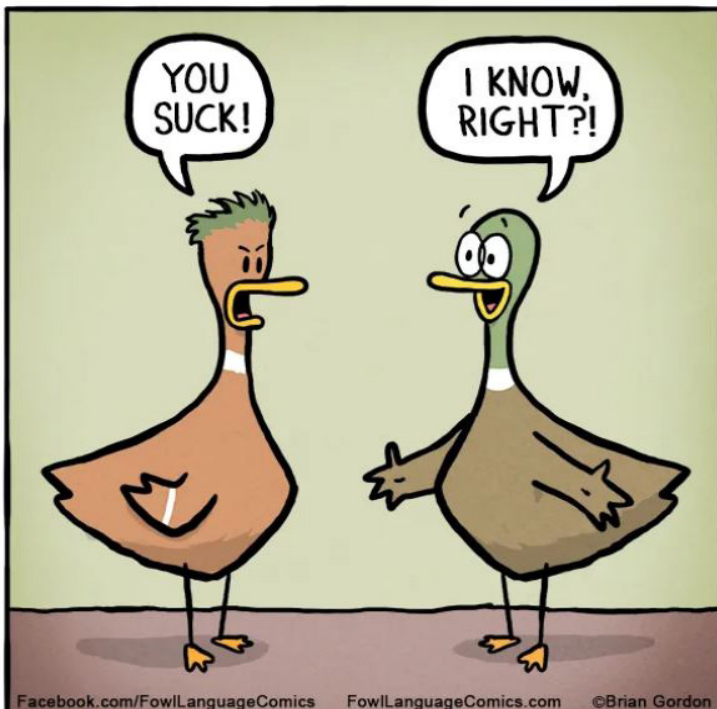
Sharing content on social media becomes an expression of one's identity, but not the real identity – rather, the ideal one. If an individual (the real self) posts a gag video on TikTok and if that video depicting an image of the creator (the ideal self) doing something funny or clever receives approval from viewers, for instance, then the real self feels validated for being humorous or clever, the purpose

for posting in the first place. The affirmations bring the ideal self in the video more in line with the real person.

As long as the ideal self and real self are, in Rogers' term, congruent – that is, the ideal is believed to be an extension of the real self – the connection to social media is positive. When the link between the real self and ideal self do not align or seem vastly different, lower self-esteem can develop. That is what causes both positive and negative effects of social media to surface, as the Mayo Clinic's writing verified.

A study by the content consultant Olapic, now owned by Social Native, found that 61 percent of individuals say the way to locate a good influencer is to find out how many followers the influencer has – what was originally called the clout score. But how does the influencer gather followers in the first place? Influencers – and indeed, all content creators on social media – gain more followers if they offer potential followers several things:

- ◆ A heuristic, or problem-solving shortcut, in a world of information overload;
- ◆ An expedient in a time-pressed world;
- ◆ A resource to ease the fear of missing out (FOMO);
- ◆ Authenticity and trustworthiness in an inauthentic and distrusting world;
- ◆ A tool to further individuation, because "I found" something that meets my "unique needs, interests, tastes and preferences";
- ◆ A method to move my real self and ideal self nearer to congruence;
- ◆ Constant and consistent distraction, novelty and entertainment;
- ◆ A trigger that directs the user's brain to release dopamine – a dose of pleasure.



THE UPSIDE OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM IS THAT IT TAKES THE STING OUT OF MOST INSULTS



The squirt of dopamine the brain secretes when it receives a social media affirmation is a validation for the ideal self, and the real self is pleased...or at least the brain thinks it is pleased. These specific characteristics of effective content creators also trigger the brain's dopamine fix, making the follower want more of the positive neurotransmitter. And in that way, followers begin to accumulate.

Even though year after year researchers find more reasons for why social media are bad for one's health, especially the young, more and more people sign up for them. What people are seeking is personal affirmation through content creation and a positive physical reaction that will help them feel good about themselves and what they are doing.



"Do I need to remind you that I have a huge Internet following?"

Some of our previous looks at this topic:

- IF 4302** New Rules Of Engagement: Young Adults, A Different Adulthood And A Very New Way Of Operating, 1/24/22
- inThought 9/7/21** Coming Out Of The Pandemic: Lessons Learned, Changed Habits And New Values
- IF 4211** The Next Internet: The Digital Industry Fancies A Metaverse, 6/17/21
- inF 1601** Hustling In The New Economy, 1/21/21
- IF 4119** It's Great Being Young, Right? Youth And Shifting Realities In The New Economy, 12/30/20
- inThought 1/4/20** How Did We Get Here? An Assessment Of A Decade Of Inferential Focus-Identified Changes And Where They Are Taking Us
- inThought 3/8/18** The Attention-Industrial Complex And Its Discontents: Capabilities Of And Challenges For Those Seeking To Grab Others' Attention
- inThought 11/20/17** Digital on Defense: Negative Effects Of The Great Digital Experiment Challenge Silicon Valley
- inF 1207** Cyber Now: The Dark Side Of The "Wonderful" Internet, 8/31/17