

Social Media and it's Misinformation are Inescapable

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Introduction

Inability to control screen time, neglect of personal/professional responsibilities, and continued internet use despite negative experiences are all symptoms of a psychological condition: Internet Addiction (*Struggling with Screen Time*, 2024). Despite harmful experiences, studies show that users' "social media habits doubled and, in some cases, tripled the amount of fake news they shared" (Medzerian, 2023). If social media harms users' mental health and information intake alike, why do they continuously fall victim? Social media has become a necessity for maintaining good mental health despite its misinformation crisis. Although it would be wise to detox, users must choose between an inclusive, harmful environment online, or a world of isolation and withdrawal symptoms when offline.

Once Exposed, Social Media is a Necessity for Maintaining Good Mental Health

Social media is designed to instill dopamine addiction. Users are encouraged to perform actions such as writing, posting, and commenting. After waiting for and receiving a reaction from others, they get an immediate surge of dopamine unlike any real-world experience (Macit, et al. 2018). Once experiencing this instant happiness, social media users expect other joyous activities to give them the same quick surge of energy (Marek, 2023). For example, while finishing a week-long project could be fulfilling, posting a selfie and immediately receiving a swarm of likes is a much quicker mood booster. After repeated social media exposure, daily activities become seemingly dull since they aren't as instantly gratifying as online reactions. To the extremes, those who are addicted think they are only worthy, successful, and popular when on the internet (Macit, et. Al. 2018).

The depression, anxiety, and addiction symptoms caused by social media are easily lessened when returning to social media. Studies show that social media users show a 70% increase in depressive symptoms and a 42% increase in social anxiety (Amedie, 2015). Some even go so far as to stalk and socially compare them to others to ease their fear of missing out or extreme self-awareness (Anushree, et al., n.d.). The loop of engaging with social media is truly inescapable whether it instills positive or negative effects. Ultimately, users compare themselves to others, get depressed or anxious they aren't as good as other users, and finally return to social media rummaging for dopamine rushes that will ease the pain.

The Misinformation of Social Media

Circulating False Facts

Misinformation on social media is tough to correct. Studying the COVID pandemic and the rapid spread of misinformation, results show that debunking each incorrect facet of a post would not change people's opinions (Zhang, 2022). Additionally, using direct and accurate medical knowledge about the virus was more likely to turn away online readers who disagreed. The truth is too complex for social media users to understand, and ironically it takes less effort to correct the misinformation than it is to spread it; passive assertion is best. In a world where emotional and dramatic content reigns supreme (*What type of content will get quick traction when posting on Instagram? – quora*, 2023), it is uncommon to find passive posts that people will legitimately take into consideration. "Lengthy posts, graphic warning and graphic explanation of misinformation have no influence" on social media users (Zhang, 2022). In other words, it is far easier for users to spread previously existing fake news than it is for users to correct it.

Harmful Resources for Mental Health Crises

As social media users and mental illness are correlated, it is understandable for them to seek help on the internet. Unfortunately, those looking for help are more likely to find unsafe resources, such as substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors (Amedie, 2015). Social media presents these activities as helpful aids, misinforming users that they are getting healthier when they are getting dangerously worse. Tumblr, for example, is a large culprit of this. While it could be a space to vent about their troubles, blogs instead provide guides for self-harm activities. Mentally ill users are instructed where to purchase, store, and use tools, such as where to cut their arm with razor blades and where to hide them from family members afterward (Guccini, et al. 2022). Social media promotes harmful solutions to mental health problems, teaches users how to hide their symptoms, and forces them to help themselves in the only way they are given.

Not-So Inclusive Movements

As for positivity and inclusivity movements, social media distorts them beyond their intentional meaning. For example, the “all bodies are beautiful” body positivity movement started by accepting everyone; extremely skinny, average weight, overweight, people with disabilities, everyone of different races, and those with disabilities (Salem, 2021). Now, magazines, social media, and advertisements claim body positivity only when pushing images of overweight people. Where it used to be focused on self-love, it now weaponizes beauty standards so social media users can only express themselves if they fit the standard of beauty. Social media is frequently littered with backhanded comments towards anyone who is conventionally unattractive. Followers commenting “Normalize this! Or, you’re so brave for posting this” on

people simply posting selfies points out something that was previously normal, making it seem like it wasn't normal to begin with (Salem, 2021). Whether or not social media misinforms others about positive movements is not the issue. These movements should teach social media users how to find beauty in themselves no matter who they are or what they look like. Instead, these movements are twisted and teach people that the only way to value yourself is to conform to conventional beauty and gender standards.

Misinformed Self-Diagnoses

Finally, there is a misinformation crisis on social media about mental health itself, users are frequently spreading false diagnostic symptoms. Alexander Avila, a YouTuber medically diagnosed with autism, researched the phenomenon, claiming: "I don't care what anyone says. There is a trend of people who are not autistic diagnosing themselves as autistic...to explain their behavior to themselves even if it's subconscious" (Avila, 2023). These falsely self-diagnosed individuals create false representations of these disabilities on social media. For users that relate to these misdiagnosed individuals, it causes a chain reaction of people incorrectly self-diagnosing themselves with different mental conditions. Clinical Psychologist Dr. Ana Yudin also addressed the topic on YouTube, stating some of these self-diagnosers do so as a form of weaponizing incompetence "to get certain rewards or to get out of certain responsibilities" (Yudin, 2022). Such as, someone misdiagnosing themselves with ADHD using it as an excuse to come into work late. In either case, this spread of diagnostic misinformation improperly educates unbeknownst viewers of what living with mental illness truly is like. People who truly have that condition may feel ostracized for not relating to their

community, and people who don't have those mental illnesses may be worried they have it for no reason.

Abstinence from Social Media is Harmful

If social media is dangerous for mental health and it spreads misinformation, why don't its users simply quit? Some people have reported a sense of withdrawal when quitting social media (Locke, n.d.). Once engaging in and later quitting social media, users experience effects equivalent to drug addiction. The cravings for an immediate dopamine boost are unbearable and can leave users feeling depressed, as nothing gives a faster surge of dopamine than getting extra likes on social media posts. For those who can't take the withdrawal, they return to social media, thus continuing the dangerous cycle.

With a purge from social media also comes a loss of connections. Across various personal testimonies, previous social media users missed the long-distance friendships that social media maintains. As for others, they experienced a strong disconnect from career networking. Former users can not stay connected with former colleagues, which has become increasingly necessary as time progresses (Vieker, 2019). For recruiting companies, "over 84% of organizations are recruiting via social media" and 1 in 5 hiring decision-makers won't even consider a candidate if they don't have a social media presence (*Surprising Social Media Recruiting Statistics*, 2024).

Conclusion

There is no escape from the negative mental effects and misinformation spread by social media, as a detox also evokes distasteful experiences. Constant dopamine can cause hallucinations and symptoms of bipolar disorder. The constant feedback loop of social media

users receiving dopamine 24/7 can make users hallucinate safety that does not exist on social media (Macit, et al. 2018). How are users expected to escape the addictive nature of social media misinformation when platforms change their brain chemistry to intake more?

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Counter Argument – Social Media Can Have Positive, Healthy Uses

Social media can fill every step of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Our brains need stimulation, and the constant visual, auditory, and sensory feedback of social media satiates the physiological tier. In a society where social media is the norm, being online with everyone provides a sense of security and fulfills the first tier. For the second tier, a sense of belonging and love, social media quite literally has features to stay connected with friends and start new relationships. The feedback on social media, such as likes, followers, and comments, boosts our esteem needs. Finally, when our feedback and online persona reach our desired goal, we can reach the self-actualization stage (Lee, 2019). Social media can have a positive impact on modern students, but the school system needs to find a healthy way to incorporate it into curriculum (Lee, 2019).

Social Media is a Platform for People to Connect with Anyone in the World

Social media breaks the boundaries of time zones, country limits, and anyone from any skill level. However, the constant demand for social interaction leads to unhealthy levels of “self-awareness”. Constant alertness to respond to messages promptly is harmful. Studies show that social media users are more likely to have depression and anxiety; 70% increase in depressive symptoms and 42% increase in social anxiety (Amedie, 2015).

Social Media Can Spread Correct Information

Social media does give a platform for doctors, researchers, and specialists to be more easily accessible for correct information, however; it gives equal opportunity for people promote lies as fact. “67% of Americans have come across fake news on social media. 10% of adults have knowingly shared fake news” (*Study shows verified users are among biggest culprits when it comes to sharing fake news 2021*) Users are verified on social media are the biggest spreaders of

misinformation. The likelihood of fake news getting reported is at it's highest for videos, those of which are not common.