THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

CONTENTS

THE **PSYCHOLOGY** OF
SOCIAL
MEDIA

In today's cultural and technological climate, almost everyone uses some sort of social media. According to a monumental 2018 Pew Research Center study, 88% of respondents between the ages of 18 to 29 reported using some kind of social media. Seventy-eight percent of 30- to 49-year-olds said the same.

The number of reported users dips for the next age group but not as much as you may think. A stunning 64% of people between the ages of 50 and 64 use social media on a frequent basis. For a generation that didn't grow up with the internet or social media, this statistic is surprising and helps explain the prevalence of social media use in our culture.

With the pervasiveness of social media across all ages, more attention needs to be given to what it's doing to us as individual users. The endless stream of communication and connection provided by social media is changing the way we think and absorb information. As it is, people are currently developing social media habits that can simultaneously benefit and harm their mental health.

Because this trend of extended social media use will only continue, more researchers are joining the field to analyze and understand the psychology of social media in our constantly connected culture.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE BRAIN

From a neurological perspective, social media affects different brain functions in unique ways. It contains many combinations of stimuli that can trigger different reactions, and because of this, social media's effects on the brain appear in a variety of ways.

Positive attention on social media, for example, affects multiple parts of the brain. According to an article in Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, accruing likes on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram causes "activation in brain circuity implicated in reward, including the striatum and ventral tegmental area, regions also implicated in the experience of receiving Likes from others." This sounds really complicated and involved, but when approached from a different perspective, it becomes a little more digestible.

The ventral tegmental area (VTA) is one of the primary parts responsible for determining the rewards system in people's bodies. When social media users receive positive feedback (likes), their brains fire off dopamine receptors, which is facilitated in part by the VTA.

Another study that employed the use of MRI technology to monitor brain activity found similar results. As researchers analyzed the brains of adolescents browsing Instagram, they found that "viewing photos with many (compared with few) likes was associated with greater activity in neural regions implicated in reward processing, social cognition, imitation, and attention."

Again, with social media so tightly connected to individuals' rewards systems, users should realize the power – and possibility for abuse – of the platforms they use. Things like gambling and narcotic drugs have the power to rule over the brain's rewards system in a similar capacity. Social media users should be aware of these parallels to avoid potential pitfalls.

Outside of the rewards systems, social media stimuli can affect the brain's decision-making and emotional processing functions. In yet another study that observed the brain activity in adolescents, researchers found that parts of the brain that deal with emotional and sensory processing reacted noticeably when participants felt excluded. This study highlighted the effects of "online social exclusion" on the developing brains of adolescents. What this means is that when social media users are excluded from online groups, chats, or events, the brain reacts in these specific regions directly.

The research on social media and how the parts of the brain react to it is still in the early stages. While these studies reflect an effort toward better understanding the effects of social media on different parts of the brain, there's still a lot of progress to be made.

"WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA USERS RECEIVE POSITIVE FEEDBACK (LIKES), THEIR BRAINS FIRE OFF DOPAMINE RECEPTORS"

WHY WE POST ON SOCIAL MEDIA

People choose different material to post on different social media platforms. When people want to post pictures, they tend to pick Instagram. When they want to post short bits of text like jokes, they go to Twitter. So much goes into deciding what to post where, and that's not even including the psychological factors that determine what gets posted and what doesn't.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR POSTING

Pinpointing exactly why people post is an impossible exercise. However, by understanding some significant social media behaviors, it becomes easier to grasp general motivations for posting.

A recent Medium article titled "The Psychology of Social Sharing" helped articulate the different tiers of posting motivations. While the writers for this article approached the psychology of posting on social media from a marketing perspective, they tapped into clear psychological incentives for sharing content.

They even cleverly adapted noted psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs to reasons people post and consume updates. They are:

1. PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS: People sometimes post to benefit the health or well-being of their friends and family.

2. SAFETY: Physical, mental, and financial security are important for people when they choose to post some material on their social media.

3. LOVE/BELONGING: Users generally post to feel some kind of social acceptance from a group or a particular individual.

4. ESTEEM People want to quell the rewards-oriented parts of their brains, which helps explain why people post "me-centric" content regularly.

5. SELF-ACTUALIZATION: As the most important facet of the human needs hierarchy, this aspect of social media posting manifests when people share their successes – getting a new job, completing an arduous project, or graduating from school, to name a few examples.

The psychological world has only recently begun to confront the motivations for posting material on social media. An article titled "Why We Share: A Study of Motivations for Mobile Media Sharing" posed an actual experiment where respondents were asked to record their posting habits and corresponding feelings in a diary and then participate in post-study interviews. After monitoring the media sharing behavior, the researchers found "that social and emotional influences played an important role in media sharing behavior."

Some researchers have looked toward the ways social media has affected the psychological development in children. The article "Growing Up Wired: Social Networking Sites and Adolescent Psychosocial Development" stated that some reasons people share is they have been reared since childhood to post. The researchers said:

Overall, adolescents and young adults' stated motivations for using (social networking sites) are quite similar to more traditional forms of communication – to stay in touch with friends, make plans, get to know people better, and present oneself to others.

Moreover, the researchers in the study explained that children and adolescents are beginning to have their identities shaped by posting on and engaging with social media.

One reason people post on social media, according to an article in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, is social media sharing can link to positive social media [feedback](#) and self-esteem. More directly, the quest for likes or follows on social media heavily influences why people post. The positive attention some users receive for posting inspires more and more social sharing in many users.

In sum, people generally post from some kind of emotional position that seeks a response. Since the very nature of social media centers on communication, it makes sense that the primary motivation for posting comes from a psychological point to connect with others. But this constant quest for acceptance and exposure on social media can lead to major psychological problems for some.

"PEOPLE GENERALLY POST FROM SOME KIND OF EMOTIONAL POSITION THAT SEEKS A RESPONSE."

WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA HABITS TURN TO SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTIONS

Social media dependency has received more and more consideration in the last five years. The boom of social networking applications has caused many researchers to explore not only why people post the content they choose to share, but also the addictive tendencies in some users.

Specifically, the article "Social Networking Sites and Addiction" pinpointed some reasons people [become addicted](#) to social networking sites (SNS). These reasons include lower self-esteem and a general anxiety about being excluded.

The authors were quick to make the distinction between social networking and social media, though, since "social networking is a way of being" while "individuals can become addicted to using social networking sites." They extend social media addiction to connect more clearly to smartphone addiction, and that levels of addiction may depend of sociodemographic information. Further, the researchers conclude that the fear of missing out (FOMO) "may be part of SNS addiction." These

are all significant features of how people are more and more inclined to post on or consume social media because of an underlying addictive behavior problem.

Social media addiction is gaining traction in the academic world because a growing number of people are reporting problems of dependence. The article "The Relations Among Social Media Addiction, Self-Esteem, and Life Satisfaction in University Students" detailed a study that explored the consequences of excessive social media use. In it, respondents who reported a moderate use of social media had a much more positive outlook on their social positions. Other participants overwhelmingly reported "addictive use of social media had a negative association with self-esteem." These same respondents in the survey said they lacked satisfaction with their lives, which they directly linked to their lowered self-esteem.

Moreover, the chapter "Social Networking Addiction" from Behavioral Addictions contextualized the significance of social media addiction in a world where it hasn't been researched as much as it should. The chapter explored more directly ways that mental health professionals can conduct effective screening and treatment processes in response to users suspected of having addictive tendencies.

Though this chapter does a good job of providing impressive prospective frameworks for screening and treatment responses, a lot more work needs to be done to confront the problem directly. In order to unpack the psychology of social media more comprehensively, a closer look into preventative measures needs to be taken.

"ADDICTIVE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA HAD A NEGATIVE ASSOCIATION WITH SELF-ESTEEM."

UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGE IN SELF CONCEPT FROM USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media allows users to express their personalities in unique ways. But the ability to create multiple accounts and to curate the material on their profiles has given users an unprecedented opportunity to develop new personae. These new digital identities can align with, be a complement to, or conflict with users' real personalities.

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES IDENTITY

In order to understand more clearly how social media shapes individuals' identities, it's necessary first to look at the landscape of social media.

The article "Psychology of Social Media: From Technology to Identity" stated the spatial makeups of hybridized social media networks has given a "rise to 'interreality,' a new social space, more malleable and dynamic than preceding social networks." Out of these new frameworks, people now:

- **Alter their own social identities.**

- **Change the ways others perceive them through curated social media profiles.**

- **Use social media tools to expand their own social connections.**

- **Have their real identities concealed by virtual ones.**

As a result of this power through new social media technology, users are in some ways able to have much greater control over their identity formations. The researchers warned, however, that social media tools should be used by older, more mature people because, when "it's used in an irresponsible way by people who are too young, they can cause problems and difficulties that in some cases even time cannot erase."

From a social media psychology standpoint, this new ability to control one's own identity formation is as empowering as it is alarming. Users can build their identities on social media as honest representations of their personalities and traits, and at the same time, they can also create entirely new social media personae. This power has impressive advantages and severe consequences.

THE EFFECTS OF SELF-PERCEPTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media users' self-image is put under a microscope when they constantly compare their situations to others. And these comparisons happen frequently when they engage with each other. Matthew Pittman and Brandon Reich, both media specialists and academics, have found that people can sharpen their own identities when they engage in intimate, image-oriented social media platforms like Instagram and Pinterest.

They stated that "quantitative results suggest that loneliness may decrease, while happiness and satisfaction with life may increase, as a function of image-based social media use. In contrast, text-based media use appears ineffectual." As a result, some users have greater confidence and a stronger self-perception on social media in image-oriented environments.

On the other hand, social media can also motivate people who view themselves negatively to build entirely new identities. The thinking here, though not always malicious, is to trick others into thinking they're someone else. In the context of social media dating services, this practice is known as catfishing. According to Scientific American, "Users may feel pressured to alter (height, weight, and age) information to present what they perceive is their ideal self and maximize their attractiveness." Social media has created an environment where users feel pressured to either lie about or fabricate their physical and psychological identities to become

more desirable.

These pressures extend far beyond the dating world and into many other facets of social media interactions. The vulnerabilities of some social media users more generally can lead to a "false Facebook-self." According to the study "The 'Facebook-self': characteristics and psychological predictors of false self-presentation on Facebook," researchers were able to highlight that people with low self-esteem on social media were much more likely to create alternate, sometimes conflicting Facebook personas.

SOCIAL PRESSURES TO FIT INTO SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS

A huge incentive to use social media stems from the acceptance users can receive from various groups. As with practically all aspects of social media, this group-focused direction of social media has benefits and drawbacks.

One major benefit for social media users is they can reach out to and connect with groups of people with similar interests across the planet. People can find more information about niche hobbies, popular pastimes, and general interests. This ability to belong to different groups is excellent for people coming from smaller or distant communities, and the psychological advantages for those individuals are immense.

According to Art Markman of Psychology Today, belonging to a group can dramatically improve a person's drive to complete tasks. Specifically, he stated "that even a simple relationship between people based on arbitrary reasons, like sharing a birthday or being randomly assigned to a group, is enough to increase feelings of warmth and motivation." Social media, thus, offers opportunities for people to form groups for both general and specific interests, which can help improve their overall productivity.

On the other hand, belonging to a group too closely or intimately can change the way the typical social media user thinks and behaves. The academic journal Media Psychology recently published a study that found that when users keep to their social media groups, they begin to mimic the behaviors of those groups. This mimicry results in a social media identity bubble that's reinforced by prolonged engagement with the group.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MENTAL HEALTH

Outside of the ability to dominate emotional and mental states, social media platforms have the power to influence, either positively or negatively, the psychological behaviors of people. Social media can dramatically help improve users' mental health, but at the same time, it can negatively impact people's psychological well-being.

MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

Though many researchers focus on the cons of social media use, there are several potential mental wellness advantages. The advantages extend across demographics and appear in unexpected ways.

For millennials, who tend to dominate some spheres of social media consumption, the digital world of social sharing poses several mental health and relationship benefits. Psychologists Adriana M. Manago and Lanen Vaughn found there are ample opportunities for friendship and happiness as younger people transition to adulthood. Specifically, they said younger social media users can now create stronger bonds with friends because of the easy access to friends' information and interests.

Further, they found these connections give users an opportunity for greater independence and autonomy, which increases their critical thinking and decision-

making abilities. These feelings of community and self-worth will palpably improve the mental health of users over the course of time.

The organization Painted Brain, which combats mental health hardships through advocacy, artistic expression, and business, outlined the ways social media can positively affect the mental health of users. From a psychological standpoint, they found many positive effects of social media on mental health, such as:

- **Social integration with similar interest groups.**

- **Healthy and body-positive lifestyle motivations.**

- **The availability of support groups.**

- **Maintaining and building new relationships.**

- **An introduction into new modes of thinking.**

MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES FROM SOCIAL MEDIA USE

While there certainly are tangible benefits to social media consumption and engagement, it's been rightly critiqued for its tendency to have toxic effects on users' mental health.

This kind of anxiety manifests much more severely in teens. As licensed clinical social worker Katie Hurley found, teens online must "confront cyberbullying, trolls, toxic comparisons, sleep deprivation, and less frequent face-to-face interactions." In a cultural moment that stresses the importance of staying online all the time, these seemingly disconnected issues can overwhelm users and result in profound anxiety. These negative effects on teens' mental health illustrate the need for parents, educators, and other role models to build better models for social media engagement.

Further, according to a scholarly article published in the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, higher levels of depression correlate with Facebook use. The study found the subjects' mental health suffered the more they spent time on Facebook, causing users to feel worse about their own positions when they compared their profiles with others.

Another article by medical doctor and cyberpsychologist Igor Pantic echoed the finding. He stated that "prolonged use of social networking sites, such as Facebook, may be related to signs and symptoms of depression." As people compare their lives to so many others, they will only find their mental health continue to deteriorate.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY

The field of social media psychology has only existed for the past 10 to 15 years, which coincides directly with the rise of social media. As a result, the research being conducted is still in its early stages. In nearly all the scholarly articles featured in this guide, researchers mentioned the limitations of their own methods so that future studies could explore them further.

Because there are so many gaps in the existing research, new perspectives need to join the field. According to Atlantic contributor and psychologist of 20 years Jean M. Twenge, people need to become much more aware of the consequences of social media dependence for the sake of our children's future. "What's at stake isn't just how kids experience adolescence," she said. "The constant presence of smartphones is likely to affect them well into adulthood."

You can respond to and help solve this overarching problem by continuing your education in the field. There are many levels of career paths in psychology that offer different research opportunities, depending on your own professional and personal preferences. An online B.S. in Psychology will prepare you to analyze and understand the psychological effects of social media on users by studying social psychology, group dynamics, and more.

Gain greater insight into how social media influences, both positively and negatively, the psychology of users with King University Online's psychology degree. Our program is taught by trained and decorated faculty who will prepare you for a successful future. With year-round course availability and a generous credit transfer policy, you may be able to earn your degree in as little as 16 months.

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