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Social Media:

Society is not Addicted, People Need it

When people discuss social media, they often emphasize the term *addiction*. However, addiction is a medical problem for which people may require rehabilitation. Instead of focusing on addiction, social media should be viewed in terms of its ability to fulfill human social needs. In these terms, the appearance of different selves and personas online becomes apparent through the need to perform social routines online. I believe that the distinction between need and addiction should be made when exploring the concept of social media, and recognize that social media addiction should not be generalized and applied to society.

Social Media is composed of apps and websites that allow people to share a variety of information, or content, online. Media scholars such as Nazir Hawi and Maya Samaha claim that society itself is “addicted” to social media. This is an opinion that is supported through a multitude of studies, yet the very term itself is loosely defined. When people think of addiction, they are likely to first think of drug and gambling addictions, among others. It would be uncommon for the everyday person to first think of social media. Therefore, “social media addiction” should be considered an umbrella term. I’m choosing to label addiction as an “umbrella term” because it seems to be

applied to a large group of people, or even society as a whole. It would be comparable to a handful of scientists claiming the modern American society is addicted to meth because many people take acetaminophen (a component of meth) to soothe minor aches and pains. In a way, I believe people use social media to soothe minor aches and pains; it's used to satisfy human, relational needs. To further understand the issues behind labeling our social media use as an addiction, I will now define social media addiction as well as break apart the very term "addiction" from its Latin roots, medical definition, and its definitions in laymen's' terms.

Social media addiction is described by Mark Griffiths as "the compulsive use of social media sites that manifests itself in behavioral addiction symptoms. The symptoms include salience, tolerance, conflict, withdrawal, relapse, and mood modification" (quoted in Hawi & Samaha 577). Using this as a working definition, people who are addicted to social media will experience some of the same symptoms as drug addicts. Essentially, these individuals would experience increased conflict and decreased tolerance with others. Self-awareness would rise with salience, or prominence, as they would become more aware of their cravings for social media. Due to this new sense of self-awareness, sensitivities would arise like withdrawal and mood modifications. Finally, the relapse would occur, where individuals cave in and go back to their technologically-ingrained ways. Such patterns and behaviors are expected of substance addicts, for example, but with social media when we speak of addiction we often apply these symptoms to all of society. Looking at society, not everyone is suffering from these same symptoms, but it implies a misdiagnosis of a large number of people.

The word addiction itself comes from the Latin roots ad-dicere (to-say), to the Latin phrase addict (assigned), to English before becoming the common word used today, addicted, or to be bound and devoted to someone or something. In its most basic, root form from the mid-sixteenth century, scholars are accusing modern society of being bound or devoted to social media; essentially going as far as to say modern society is enslaved by their devices. Some may argue that this is true. However, it is important to recognize the ability of social media to fulfill human needs. This leads me to believe we have less of a parasitic relationship with technology than this accusation implies.

Through the use of such media-ridden devices, a scholarly search in 2019 yielded almost one-million results for the definition of addiction, with just a couple clicks. Aviel Goodman, a psychiatrist, defines addiction as:

“... a process whereby a behavior, that can function both to produce pleasure and to provide escape from internal discomfort, is employed in a pattern characterized by (1) recurrent failure to control the behaviour (powerlessness) and (2) continuation of the behaviour despite significant negative consequences (unmanageability)” in the British Journal of Addiction. (Goodman 1403).

In layman's terms, addiction is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “the fact or condition of being addicted to a particular substance, thing, or activity.” This definition is not particularly beneficial, considering the word “addicted” is not defined. Furthermore,

the Oxford Dictionary describes the term addicted as “physically and mentally dependent on a particular substance, and unable to stop taking it without incurring adverse effects,” and informally as “enthusiastically devoted to a particular thing or activity.” This concept of dependency opens an entirely new set of doors to the question of whether or not modern society is addicted to social media.

With the layman’s definitions, it does not seem right to label society’s use of social media as an addiction when it is not a physical entity that can be manipulated. In terms of mental dependency, the entirety of society does not seem to “incur adverse effects” when stopping. This is a concept typically referred to as withdrawal. Drug addicts often experience symptoms of withdrawal that can upset the body’s rhythmic function and can cause a fever, sweating, among others. Again, I’d like to emphasize that labeling society as addicted is implying a large number of people are suffering from the medical symptoms. The primary goal of my claim is to make people aware that there can be negative consequences for people who are suffering from the medical condition. These consequences could mean that people who have the medical condition could be denied the help they need. Essentially, whether viewing “addiction” in terms of its Latin roots, or its scholarly, layman, or even informal definitions, it should be increasingly evident that society’s attraction and integration of social media should not be attached to the term addiction.

Using such an umbrella term can be harmful to specific groups of society. Not only is the umbrella term enveloping society as a whole, but it is also covering people who don’t have access. Even if it were narrowed down to those labeled millennials or

Generation Z—the age groups most typically presumed to be addicted to social media—these age groups do not have a solid definition. With that, these young people deemed most susceptible, tend to be accused of being addicted to their devices and their social media. The word “addicted” carries a lot more weight than people allow it when it is used so loosely. Moreover, the concept of social media addiction is generally not only applied to such age groups, it includes both people who have access and people who don’t.

Access is a crucial concept when considering social media. I don’t believe it is fair or righteous to use such an umbrella term when a multitude of factors are at play to inhibit people’s access. However, I believe a vast majority of people are represented online regardless of their social media usage. People appear in social media profiles, data, and even in the backgrounds of others’ photographs. By that definition, “online” or “connected” could be considered an umbrella term applicable to society, but not addicted.

Ultimately, however, the problem begins with using the term addiction to describe society’s desire to stay connected through social media. It’s used as a comforting term to describe the phenomenon. Essentially, I believe that the umbrella term of “addiction” gives people comfort and thus I believe it is both an umbrella and a comforting term. To apply one word to all of society is inaccurate even when taking the outliers into account. This emphasizes the need to understand society as a whole and decide that the concept of social media addiction is not applicable to society.

It is important to look at addiction as a comforting term, as it is entirely different from its variety of definitions. It is time we close the umbrella and become comfortable with the integration of social media, rather than fearing it and giving it a label. The telephone has existed for years, as a form of improved ease of communication over distances. When it was new, people may have assumed that society was addicted to phones. I believe that social media integration is just another new addition to society that we have chosen to label as addiction to give a name to something that's still too complex and evolving to describe. Again, the loose usage of the term could lead to the denial of help for people who need it to battle the medical condition. I believe society felt it needed a stronger word to describe this universal obsession, and found comfort in using the term addiction.

Society seems to prefer labeling the integration of social media as an addiction just to give it a name, regardless of its implications. For example, there are rehabilitation centers and programs for those who are seeking help for addictions such as drugs, alcohol, or gambling. However, social media addiction programs or centers currently cease to exist. I believe that if a majority of society was addicted to social media, such programs would become increasingly apparent, or more people would seek help. Social media has become so integrated into our society that it is almost impossible to give it up. If people do give up social media, they would risk missing out on opportunities and connections granted and utilized by society in various organizations and relationships. A brief round of interviews I conducted with some of my peers found that they generally use social media because they're afraid of what they'll miss if they don't. In fact, I had a

class that required me to give up social media for a week, and I as well as others struggled with this. Therefore, I believe that people hesitate to give up social media even if an incentive was offered. This significantly emphasizes how much we have begun to rely on its integration.

It has been argued that this “addiction” to social media creates separations from the self and from others and increasingly drives societal disconnect. In terms of the self, social media is seen as leading to depression in individuals (Amedie). However, depression should not be immediately assumed to correlate with addiction, although depression and addiction can go together. Additionally, social media has been shown to decrease self-esteem and satisfaction with life (Hawi and Samaha). These concepts may be related to the use of social media to satisfy needs, which will be discussed later. This relationship of reliance people have formed with social media could be a cause of such a decrease in self-esteem or satisfaction. In the same way, people tend to rely on someone else and suffer from similar consequences when such a person becomes separated from them. This still does not justify the use of the term “addicted.” Human beings are social creatures by nature, it is not surprising that they have become so attached and entwined in such a technological form of communication such as social media.

It is also crucial to explore the belief that people have become increasingly antisocial as a result of social media (Amedie). This paradox sounds just as confusing as it is: social media has caused people to become increasingly antisocial. Letting that sink in, such a bold statement is assuming that people have separated themselves from

the present and thus from the people around them. From the use of social media as soon as people wake up, to right before they fall asleep, it can be hard to believe that people are truly being antisocial when they are constantly connected. This constant connection is argued to displace connectivity from offline to online (Lai). Essentially, when people use social media in the presence of others, they are now disconnected from those in front of them. However, this means it can be hard to gauge whether or not people are truly connected or disconnected. Therefore, it should be safe to say that the connections are just different. This distinction is what has helped us become so reliant on the integration of social media to fulfill needs.

At this point, social media is so ingrained into society that people use it to satisfy social needs. Social media has allowed people the ability to craft multiple personas, the online self and the offline self (Marriott and Buchanan). Many people already act differently among different groups (think how someone acts at work compared to their behavior with friends), and social media just provides different platforms for this phenomenon. As discussed later, people tailor different social media platforms to accomplish different goals. Therefore, I believe that the variety of platforms social media affords people allows them to craft multiple online selves and identities in addition to the differences between the offline and online self. These different selves allow people the ability to shape others' perceptions of them—an affordance of social media that other communication forms make difficult. For example, some platforms allow anonymity, separating the text from the person who posted it. Often times, people refer to communicating online as “hiding behind the screen.” This mindset often means people

say things online that their offline selves wouldn't. It can also allow people to act in a manner that they typically wouldn't without the mask of their online presence. This can lead to a multitude of issues such as cyberbullying, but for the purpose of my argument, this concept emphasizes the importance and prevalence of selves, personas, and perception.

Again, social media satisfies human needs. From that perspective, it is hard to understand how it could be labeled an addiction. It is true that some people could be considered shopping addicts for filling their closets with clothes, even with clothing being a basic human need. Even in this example, it is calculated on a case-by-case basis—not everyone is addicted to shopping because of their need for fulfillment—just as not everyone is addicted to social media. In addition to impression management, social media also fulfills our needs for social routine by enforcing social competencies and directing the flow of information (Lai). Society was able to perform social routines without social media, but after its introduction and quick integration, society seems to have been convinced that they are addicted to this new technology. In essence, however, humans are performing almost the same routines without social media as they are with, they just happen to have a new tool to satisfy these needs more effectively. For instance, to direct the flow of information, users can simply post and streamline the information to their chosen audience on their chosen platform, rather than seek out friends and family individually to tell them. Essentially, with a few minutes typing and sharing online, someone has the ability to reach more people than they could in a day with prior methods of communication.

More times than not, if people have one social media account, they will have others as well. By not limiting themselves to one platform, they alleviate the chance of missing out on information and selves presented differently. For example, many people see Facebook as a platform designed for updating people on their personal lives, and friends lists often consist of family members, colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Instagram relies heavily on visual media such as pictures and videos with witty captions, it's a platform primarily catered towards younger generations. Twitter, with its character restrictions, require users to say as much as they can in as few words as possible. Both Twitter and Instagram seem to extend beyond acquaintances and use the term followers instead of friends, implying that people can gather around people with common interests. In other words, I believe social media allows people to adapt their self and persona to fit the mold of the different social media platforms.

Additionally, people vary in the way they present themselves online and offline. It is in this sense that it is important to consider the question of addiction in terms of impression management. Prior to social media, it was fairly difficult to present different selves. Some may argue that people are different depending on who they are with, but social media has made this easier. People are able to post and share what they choose, thus altering the self they depict online. For example, people can choose the pictures they choose to post on Instagram, which then alters their followers' perceptions. For some followers, these chosen images may be the only impression they have.

People adapt the way they act around certain groups of people and also become concerned when people don't think highly of them. The concept remains true with

Facebook and other platforms, people are able to manage others' impressions of themselves while simultaneously presenting different selves based on the platform. In cyberspace, these concepts carry over from peoples' offline presentations, as people generally don't post about their flaws. Scholars argue that impression management is just one aspect of performing social routines and that such routines are human needs that need to be satisfied (Lai).

Again, the extent to which society relies on social media to fulfill social needs should be emphasized. Chih-Hui Lai categorizes such needs as social routines that include impression management, overflow of information, and social competencies (20, 25). These routines existed long before the rise of social media so it is ineffectual to consider its integration as addiction. What may be considered new about this fulfillment of needs is the availability of self-gratification online. For example, someone may seem conceited if they were to approach a group and begin discussing their awards and accolades or even started showing off pictures of themselves on vacation. However, on social media, this is nothing out of the ordinary, and it leads to one goal—self-gratification. By posting life updates, awards, pictures, and almost anything else, people generally expect others to respond. Whether in likes or comments, this gives the social media user self-gratification. I believe many people would be willing to admit that when they post something, they check the likes often, something that seems almost meaningless; although it isn't meaningless in terms of self-gratification. Some people will even delete a post if it doesn't have enough likes. This is different from people's offline presentations as things can't just be deleted if there aren't enough

reactions. Essentially, when people post online, they hope to get something back from it. It's almost as though they're posting to share with others, but mostly for themselves—it's a reassurance. Self-gratification is an affordance of social media that has become a need people rely on fulfilling online. Therefore, when discussing social media, it should be referred to in terms of its integration and ability to fulfill social needs rather than as an addiction.

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