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Social Media: Perception vs. Reality

In just 15 years, social media has become a dominant channel for human interaction, with an estimated 2.5 billion active users currently. This ever-increasing statistic is reflective of a global society driven by technology and mass communication. With social media, there is general discourse and news dissemination that even the most forward-thinking minds from a century ago probably would not have been able to predict. With all its popularity and usage, it is necessary to ponder the effects that social media has on the individual, and therefore on the rest of society as a whole. Though there are a myriad of these effects to observe, one of the most recognizable is that social media often breeds complex facades that seek to compromise true character for outward appearance.

Humans have always been social creatures, and with very good reason. Social groups give people their sense of purpose, while the cooperation aspects help them maintain conditions necessary to live. For this reason, it is almost natural that people gravitate to social media; the posts, comments, and likes make many people feel validated by other people in the world. This sensation of validation, however, can become quite addictive to the average person, resulting in many social media users actively seeking it out. In fact, according to a study by California State University, receiving a like on Facebook is comparable to the neural sensation one feels after intaking a small amount of cocaine, as it triggers the amygdala, which processes the importance of events and impending rewards. Consequently, it is rather common for users to feel the need to

tally a large amount of likes. Just as cocaine addicts tend to do outrageous things to obtain the drug, social media users oftentimes go to measures far outside of their regular personality in order to get likes and attention, from pulling dangerous stunts to intentionally sparking controversy and anything in between. Actions like these can be dangerous and harmful, but an even deeper subproblem is that this leads to people living much of their lives in a facade realm in which they can develop dishonest traits and attributes of pretense. These changes, no matter how nuanced, could affect the way one is viewed by others, and could even affect self-perception.

Many people use social media to post pictures of themselves or to show off their whereabouts. Not surprisingly, this has led to a generational uptick in narcissism levels. In a cross temporal study by San Diego State University, psychologists found a noticeable increase in mean narcissism levels that coincides with the 21st century rise of social media apps like Facebook and Twitter. Nearly two-thirds of the modern day college students who completed the inventory placed above the average narcissism score of students from 1979-1985. This suggests that social media has indeed affected the way people self-perceive, as there is now a large and accessible outlet to self-promote and aggrandize. In the same way users seek to be validated, people also seek admiration and praise for their lives. This rather typical eagerness for compliments can manifest itself in a number of different ways, from posting an excessive amount of selfies to creating fabricated good tidings to announce. Either way, it is evident that the internet elevates people's consciousness of how they are perceived, which often impels people to make themselves seem like more than what they are.

As is the case with many milestones of innovation, the net pros must be weighed with the net cons in order to arbitrate its actual utility. While social media can be considered a wildly

important mainspring of both the social and economic sphere, at its core its main use is for the individual. Therefore, it is just as flawed as humans, as it works almost as a mirror to the insecurities, deep desires, and vanity issues of people in the real-world. It is essential to acknowledge the shortcomings of social media globally so that people are not caught up in a simulacrum universe, but rather focus on the true social world and all its functioning systems, which unlike social media, cannot simply be logged off.

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