

How does social media make you feel?

The objective of my short film series project is to capture the adolescents' paradoxical relationship with social media: self-exploration of developing one's identity, surviving within the unrealistic standards of the social media culture. Everyone has different experiences with social media, but for me, it's an inviting space for me to explore different forms of expression. The unrealistic standards, which co-exists as social media, act as a juxtaposition and rather encourages me to be vulnerable with my most authentic self.

The second part of the series "Paradoxical Relationship" is a social experiment in a form of art. "How does social media make you feel?" I left this following question up to my peers' interpretations and allowed each individual's experiences to build upon one another, to depict a sense of a wide range of paradoxical relationships between adolescents and social media culture. While portraying others' relationships, my objective was to find the similarity within the experiences.

Social media takes a big, unnecessary but necessary, part in Gen Z's and millennials' lives, and has a direct relation to adolescents' mental health. Though social media offers a powerful space to validate others' experiences and bring the blooming of community, and in doing so, allow adolescents' to find healing through vulnerability. I hope that we can come together to make our social media platforms into places of not validation, but authenticity and growth. A space for adolescents to unapologetically explore themselves. Through my project, I hope to celebrate the uniqueness of the individual as well as the shared experiences that connect all of us.

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Social Media in the Digital Age

Everything exists under interwoven layers of truth, and the truth itself exists alongside the hidden lies. This, what we like to call “truth,” is multidimensional, and it comes the same way with social media- the most beloved platform in our generation today. Within social media, there are layers of comforting lies beside disheartening truths, and loving community beside unbreakable walls before *I* exist. This social media is ingrained in adolescents’ culture whether we love it or not. Yes, we may have the choice to download Instagram on our smartphones, but wherever we look, to the left or right, we are faced with this foggy wall of information that seems so unnecessary yet necessary. Most adolescents use social media to build on social communication and friendships, to exchange ideas and pictures in the hopes to develop new interests, and mainly to experiment with new forms of expression. Social media feels as this secondary world that seems so close yet far from us, where we can truly express our “true” selves or voices that seem so risky in real life, aka “IRL,” (but just to the extent where we aren’t left feeling judged.) I can speak for myself and on behalf of my adolescent community that our relationship with social media is simply confusing. It’s a love-hate relationship that we cannot just run away from. The “in-your-face” friend tallies, status updates, and pictures of others having a good time may leave one feeling inadequate while leaving others with a boost of inspiration and positivity about themselves. Social media provides us with a magic spell that has a potential of creating a healing space with a danger of killing our humanity if handled insensitively: the ability to choose what to reveal about ourselves and promote positive characteristics while filtering out the negatives, without having to share our truest form of *self*.

The Paradoxes of Social Media

Now, during the time of quarantine, adolescent's relationship with social media has become more co-dependent than ever before. Ever since the quarantine, I noticed a significant increase in my social media usage, as it allowed me to listen to how social media makes me feel and pay close attention to my relationship with it. Through this social experiment, I hope to see what others’ relationship with social media looks like. The information below is the responses I received. to these following questions: “How does social media make you feel? How would you describe your relationship with social media?” “What is one thing you want/ wish to change about social media?” “What is a song that best describes your relationship with social media?”

My Instagram followers’ age ranges mostly from 13 to 24; 14% of 13-17-year-olds, and the highest range of 58% 18-24-year-olds. All the responses I collected were from adolescents. Through this social experiment, I observed that a lot of Gen Z and millennial’s relationship with social media share one similarity: the paradoxicality.

How does social media make you feel? How would you describe your relationship with social media?

“Fear, unnecessary but necessary, short-term happiness, addictive and sweet, love-hate, impersonal and unforgiving, toxic, brain-damaging, visual and objective, stimulating and exhausting, painful and unwanted, anxious and weary, degrading and depressing, creative and interesting, soul-sucking and broad, parasitic, entertaining, constant, addicting and toxic, relatively healthy, toxic addiction, marginally worthwhile, opportunistic and liberating, exhausting and numb, fake, addicted and annoyed, forgettable and perennial, appalled and addicted, refreshing and conflicting, needy, inclusive and isolating, red flags, colorblind, exhausting and additive, boredom and envy, constantly comparing, entertainment and addiction, addictive and intimidating”

What is one thing you want/ wish to change about social media culture?

● ***"UTOPIAN FANTASY" to AUTHENTICITY***

"stop making it a utopian fantasy" "that something has to be perfect to be posted" "the normalization of facetune" "How everyone thinks everything they see is real or use social media to stalk people's location".
"people are given likes and followers for their looks instead of talents"
"more authenticity" "more genuine and willing to show the “ugly” or “weird’ parts of life"
"more genuine and uplifting- a more positive and welcoming place" "more real and deep connections"

● ***DISTORTED HATRED to EMPOWERMENT***

"people's sense of entitlement to the right of pointing fingers and criticizing others when they are not well informed enough or even relevant enough to say anything. It's like they're putting themselves in a place of superiority and judging blindly."
"body shaming" "cancel culture" "dark humor. it's usually very offensive and sometimes racist" "the negative comments" "people that think they're woke, but are really just spreading wagon unnecessary hate"
"instead of bringing up insecurities by comparing, encourage introspection and happiness"
"sharing creativity/ happiness and less of selling yourself"

● ***MORE THAN JUST A SCREEN***

"people take it way too seriously" "the obsession with numbers of likes, etc." "seeking validation from social media." "The pressure to be perfect and show only the best aspects of yourself and your life" "less addicting, and have everybody spend less time on it"
"for everyone to limit themselves and enjoy life. Not a screen."

The Effects of Social Media on Mental Health

Have you ever felt so dismayed, scrolling through your feed, and felt everyone else's life is much more interesting than yours? Felt like everyone around you had the most picture-perfect lives, and already had their life all figured out? Felt like you weren't fit enough, social enough, smart enough or just enough? If you have a smartphone, the answer is probably yes. These feelings seem so normal, until they get rooted in us by tiny, subtle increments and become a trap-like fundamental that we cannot seem to escape. Each hour spent on social media shares a close relationship with adolescents' mental health. "A recent study found that the more social media platforms and adolescent uses, the more likely they are to have symptoms of depression and anxiety, regardless of overall time spent on social media." One psychology professor at San Diego State University discovered that teens who spend 5 or more hours a day online were 71% more likely to have at least one risk factor for suicide compared to teens who spent only 1 hour a day online. The risk significantly increases with only two or more hours spent online. According to the American Psychiatric Association, "teens develop depression and begin to exhibit classic symptoms due to the intensity of the online world when they spend a substantial amount of time on social media." There has been an increasing parallel- relationship between the usage of social media in recent years, and the rate of mental disorders among adolescents. Young adults aged 18-25 had the highest prevalence of any mental illness at 22.1% compared to adults aged 26-49 at 21.1% and aged 50 and older at 14.5%. 1 in 6 U.S. adolescents aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year. 50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% by age 24, which are the predominant ages on social media. Suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst people aged 10 to 34.

A Call for Creating a Healthier Social Media Platform

So can we make social media a healthier platform and a welcoming space to promote mental health awareness? Everybody experiences mental health issues in different ways, but social media can be a space for them to talk about our feelings, as a step to start a conversation about mental health.

Social media is an open platform with equal accessibility, which enables users to create and share content while social networking. When we discuss social media, the first thing that comes out of our mouth are usually regarding the negative aspects. Though, the light always exists on the other side of the shadow. Us adolescents, as the majority users of social media, hold great power of change, before the social media with its inescapable trap-like traits.

One thing I love the most about social media is the vulnerability within online communities. This form of vulnerability is rare to find, but when I do, they are beyond inconceivable. I sit in awe of how strong and empowering our humanity is, and such vulnerability reminds me of the beauty of resilience. "I won't let my pain turn my heart into something ugly. I will show you that surviving can be beautiful."- Christy Ann Marline

Strength is vulnerability. Through vulnerability, it allows us to heal together. Not only does it have the power to heal our own wounds, but also to validate others' experiences and bring blooming to the community as a whole. Some stories may seem intimidating and unapproachable in real life, but with our own space, social media can remind one that they are not alone, just with the tap of their thumbs.

LISA OLIVERA is a therapist and a writer “who feels so honored to witness others in their humanness and journey.” Through Instagram, she promotes mental health awareness by normalizing self-love and redefining what it means to be strong in our society. She hopes to create a “space of acceptance and compassion for the wholeness of humanity” by sharing what’s truly on her heart.

RUPI KAUR, aka “the face of modern poetry,” created a new genre of poetry: instapoetry. She began releasing short poems to her followers lines that were raw yet gentle and tackled powerful topics, such as; trauma, abuse, loss, love and healing. She shares her collection of poetry, illustration, quotes, and prose pieces, each masterfully weaving her journey of self-discovery through her pains. Unlike traditional poetry, Kaur uses Instagram to create a sense of community in life’s inevitable pain, and builds a sense of relief by providing validation that pain is not a unique nor shameful experience but something which is extremely relatable. “You do not just wake up and become a butterfly-growth is a process.”

RIANNE MEIJER is an Amsterdam based lifestyle model and does a great job in defeating unrealistic beauty standards with a humorous touch. She started a trend of posting her beautifully worked photo shoots followed with raw behind the scenes photos. Simply by sharing these raw moments, she invites her followers into seeing that the collection of best moments we see on Instagram isn’t everything.

“Being a human is a complex ride of emotions; and whether you’re having a good or a bad day, sometimes just accepting your feelings is hard.” This form of shared vulnerability took a significant part in giving voice to my feelings, and a light of hope into my darkness when I was lost. I came to realize that I don’t need to mold myself into my filtered social media profile; that I don’t need anyone’s approval to be my most authentic self. I am enough. I want social media to become a room for acceptance, authenticity, and aliveness within themselves. Let’s turn our social media platforms into places of not validation, but authenticity and growth. A space for adolescents to unapologetically explore their forms of expression. Whether it be standing up in redefining the beauty standards or raising mental health awareness, the vulnerability will be a key to creating a healthier social media platform.

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